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THE REALISTIC REVOLT IN  
MODERN POETRY.



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REALISTIC REVOLT  
IN MODERN POETRY



BY

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## PREFACE.

If it were possible, I should prefer to say nothing of the help I have received from friends in the preparation of the following essay, because I am unwilling that any one who has given me good advice should have to bear any responsibility for what I have said. It is I who must be responsible for the opinions expressed, and they only for having encouraged me to publish, or perhaps for not having clearly enough dissuaded me from that course. Yet if I have turned the generous assistance of Professor H. J. C. Grierson to negative and imperfect results, I cannot feel myself exonerated from the duty of making a full acknowledgment of my debt to him: his careful and friendly criticism and all the abundance of his suggestions have, I earnestly hope, not been entirely wasted. I should also like to express my gratitude to Professors Dewar and Morley, of University College, Reading, for aid in a multitude of ways, and to Mr. A. J. D. Porteous, of Oriel, Mr. E. P. Dickie, of Christ Church, and Mr. G. Watson, Oxford, for assistance in reading proofs.

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6

# THE REALISTIC REVOLT IN MODERN POETRY.

## I.

THE Victorian age has been gradually receding into the background, until it now seems curiously distant. Yet since it closed with the Queen's death, even as the Elizabethan age proper ended with the decease of Elizabeth, only twenty years have passed ; and not a few of the younger artists of that time are happily still with us, though in spirit and in many essentials of their art they belong to a race that has vanished. Our illusion of remoteness from the great Victorians is partly the result of an entire reversal of our attitude, aims and theories, partly it is due to the vast amount of experiment which has filled the twentieth century, partly, no doubt, to the fact that not one of the older fellowship, except Swinburne, survived into the new age, for all became old together, dropping one after another like ripe fruit—Carlyle, Arnold, Browning, Newman, Tennyson, Pater, Morris, Gladstone, Ruskin. Save perhaps Dr. Bridges (by bent of mind and artistic conscientiousness a Victorian, but by boldness of experiment in cadence a Georgian), Mrs. Meynell, Austin Dobson, and Sir William Watson, they left few disciples. And between us and them came the nineties, disturbed and ill at ease ; the overthrow of the Titans was at hand.

In 1910, when Swinburne was still alive, it would have been more difficult to point out the tendencies of the age than it is in 1922. The Georgian epoch has become conscious of its difference and of its individuality. But

the present writer, in noting some features of contemporary poetry, makes no pretence of writing an exhaustive treatise. The abundance and variety of modern verse would alone be sufficient to forbid this.

The current uncertainty among our artists, a vacillation now passing away, is the hesitancy incident to every new development. But it is more than that : it is the anarchy consequent on our rebellion against Victorianism and all which that term implies. There is no more typical representative of the past age than Tennyson. He is the exponent of its art and the popular mouthpiece of its science. He it is who gives voice to its obstinate questionings, he who is the expositor of its heroes and heroines, of its morality, social and private. He is the expression of its complacency and the absurd approval with which it looked round on its own progress—

“ Fifty years of ever-broadening Commerce !  
Fifty years of ever-brightening Science !  
Fifty years of ever-widening Empire ! ”—

of its humanitarianism and its sentiment, of its vulgarity and refinement, its self-deception and its prudery, its greatness and its power. The fame of Tennyson in his own day was the appreciation of his topicality, and that fame will suffer eclipse until the problems of his age, which took up too much of his time, have been forgotten. He is to us like a granite colossus encased in plaster, that was very beautiful till the rains came, and will be very noble again when the wash has gone. But our young poets have come on him in the transition and, not a little to their disgrace, have laughed him to scorn. They feel that his art is nothing but a stultifying and mechanical mannerism, while we others, who are not poets and can

still find something to admire in the poet if not in the publicist, are weary of the problems which stirred the Victorians. In ethics we have left far behind not only the good maid Elaine but the woman Guinevere, types of the good and the bad no longer interesting. Nor has the lover of Amy or the lover of Maud anything to say to us ✓ on politics and science that is not commonplace. Evolution and the higher criticism, how strange and unfamiliar these things are ! The questionings of Clough and Arnold, how little they mean to us, how untouched they leave our problems, and how inadequate their answers !

## II.

Now that the common Victorian idiom has been renounced, and its scheme of things departed from, one cannot help feeling bewildered in our poetic Babel. There is no speech familiar to Wilfred Owen and Mr. de la Mare or understood of both Mr. Davies and Mr. Gordon Bottomley. To vary the figure—though there is no doubt which is the main branch of the delta into which the stream of English poetry has broken up, it is still impossible to leave any out of account as backwaters which will end in the desert, not channels which will fall again into the parent river. All we can say is—to adopt the words of a reviewer in the *Athenaeum*—that we know whence the moderns come, but we cannot say whither they go. The one certain fact is that practically all are agreed in their opposition to the Tennysonian tradition, some hesitatingly, some willingly, and, the more violent, antagonistic to all earlier literature and art as well. We propose, therefore, rather to investigate some of the causes and results of this hostility than to estimate any individual poet's worth.

## III.

Hitherto, in the simpler ages, the artist was content with nothing short of the best that his tools, his medium, his artistic powers, and the limitations imposed by circumstances and character permitted for the expression of his idea. The finish of the old Mycenean sculptures, for example, far less complete, as it is, than the exquisite perfection of Praxiteles, was not deliberately rough, but was conditioned solely by the technical ability and circumstances of the artist. We can trace how the Greek sculptors by slow persistence mastered the hard marble until in the Parthenon they succeeded in getting the best both from the impersonal factors—the tools and the material—and from their personal contribution of skill, patience and artistic vision. But thereafter, in the decline of Greek art, when the victory over matter had been accomplished, the artists were free to display their mastery in excess of detail and in overfinish. There comes a time, that is to say, when the artist's powers are not wholly exhausted in a creative work, and when he has a reserve of technical skill which seduces him into trivialities that do not conduce to the aim he has set before him. The history of all the arts is the same.

“ From hour to hour we ripe and ripe,  
And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot.”

For the finish, which has been so painfully achieved, soon begins to pall and the artists to seek freshness and vigour by retracing their steps.

The time for that reaction has come in English poetry, a reaction which is proving as violent as that led by Wordsworth against the feeble descendants of Dryden, himself a revolutionary.

“ This is the song of youth,  
This is the cause of myself; [says Mr. Orrick Johns,]  
I knew my father well and he was a fool,  
Therefore will I have my own foot in the path before  
    I take a step ;  
I will only go into new lands,  
And I will walk on no plank-walks,  
The horses of my family are wind-broken,  
And the dogs are old,  
And the guns rusty,  
I will make me a new bow from an ash-tree,  
And cut up the homestead into arrows.”

The poets are forced to the conclusion that the Victorians have achieved a finish on which it would be ridiculous to attempt to refine. Had not the nineties tried with no satisfying result ? And even if it were possible, the moderns believe that their predecessors had wandered far from reality and truth, and that poetry must abandon their exhausted refinements for an art, perhaps much less accomplished, but stronger and nearer to the heart of man. It is felt with reason that poetry had become too bookish, had been too long manufactured in the study. To-day we have Mr. Vachel Lindsay, muscular and rugged, touring the country like a Teutonic *scop* and reciting his poetry in the open air ; he would reconcile poetry and the populace, restore its “ springiness,” and make it no longer “ the refuge of preciosity in those folk who have made of poetry a retreat from life and not an explanation and justification in beauty of life.” This is exactly what modern poetry is attempting to do ; poetry is to be no longer an evasion of life but an acceptance of it in all its details and particularities. It is felt that romanticism has been too exclusive

and circumscribed, since the moderns have come to realise vaguely that, outside the Palace of Art, there is a world of fact and of science in which they can find virginal forests and moors with no beaten tracks.

The Romantics, too, had set out from the Happy Valley of the eighteenth century—to use Professor Saintsbury's application of Johnson's phrase—with the same cry for freedom and hunger for discovery. Wordsworth in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* had declared :

“ Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge—it is as immortal as the heart of man. If the labours of the men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the poet will sleep then no more than at present ; he will be ready to follow the steps of the man of science, not only in those general and indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of science itself. The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, the Mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the poet’s art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time shall ever come when these shall be familiar to us, and the relations under which they are contemplated by the followers of these respective sciences shall be manifestly and palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering beings. If the time should ever come when what is now called science, thus familiarised to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the poet will lend his divine spirit, to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the being thus produced as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man.”

The Romantics made a few tentative efforts to appropriate these lands ; but they had a sufficiently ample field to roam

until they, in their turn, shrank into their Palace of Art from the grossness of the world they had discovered. Our moderns are the children of the promise, finding romance in the prosaic, beauty in the homely, grace in the rigidities of exact science,

“Watching the strangeness of familiar things.”

But like every new movement, the reaction against Victorianism and romance has its extremists who seem determined, above all else, on being original, without considering that their changes in the artistic medium, by which they have to communicate with their audience, are too violent and sudden. It is true that an ancient Greek would be as much at a loss before the statuary of Rousseau as before our photographs: the gulf between the art which he knew and that of modern Europe is too wide to be jumped at one bound. Nor must we forget that the idiom and inflection of the language of art changes as much as the ordinary speech of a community, and that after two thousand years it will be unintelligible to its older speakers. But though it changes, the change is gradual; and in the development of art, the characteristic expression of the æsthetic consciousness through the ages, we never find lacunæ. Though the barbarians may have destroyed classic art and built their own out of its ruins, yet within the classical period or within the modern, between the cataclysms that blot out all traditions, the continuity of art is clear and certain.

It is, perhaps, unfair to emphasise the activities of the extremists—Messrs. Sassoon, Osbert Sitwell, T. S. Eliot, Edgar Lee Masters—but their very extravagance is instructive, as displaying in a greater degree the tendency more happily, if less obviously, illustrated by others

*W. H. D. C.*

Nor do we condemn the moderns for seeking new conventions, but a small and noisy group who deny the continuity of art and believe, like the communists in politics, that they, the sons and daughters of the Victorians, the inheritors of all the ages, can sweep the ground clear and build anew from the foundation. The result might be successful if the new art were tentative, timid, flexible. But nothing is so apparently complete, dogmatic, fixed. If the extremists were willing to submit to a long period of experiment and rejection where they found their new dialect unintelligible, the new art might live. But these coteries and sects would have the new art begin and culminate in themselves ; they want to plough, sow and reap. Each little set is like a child with a complete imaginative world of its own, based on no empirical foundation, created without the rejection of the useless or the imperfect, a world without evolution, sprung full grown from a revolutionary mentality.

Though it would be uncritical to trace down all the characteristics of modern poetry to one man, we cannot help feeling at least that the Wordsworth of the Realistic Revolt is Walt Whitman and its Coleridge Browning in his realistic poems. It is Whitman, however, rather than Browning, whose creed has been adopted and who has preached anarchy in the poetic world, directly by his own example and indirectly through his disciples, Henley and Mr. Kipling in this country, Mr. Ezra Pound in America, and perhaps through Arno Holz in Germany, and Bloch, Bazalgette, and many others, in France, to name only a few who have come under the influence of his compelling personality. It is Whitman who has led the return to nature, the primitive and the realistic, and whose example has revolutionised both the form and the matter of poetry.

It is Whitman who has given us the manifesto of the new school :

“ Dead poets, philosophs, priests,  
Martyrs, artists, inventors, governments long since,  
Language-shapers on other shores,  
Nations once powerful, now reduced, withdrawn or  
desolate,  
I dare not proceed till I respectfully credit what you  
have left wafted thither,  
I have perused it, owning it is admirable (moving  
awhile among it),  
That nothing can ever be greater, nothing can ever de-  
serve more than it deserves,  
Regarding it all intently a long while, then dismissing  
it.  
I stand in my place with my own day here.” ✓

That the influence of Whitman has not been in all respects beneficial is a truism. For this we must blame in part the failure to understand the circumstances and aims of the American poet. His disciples were attracted by the novelty of them ; and the desire for liberty, itself one of the most hopeful and commendable features of modern poetry, may mean that our poets are claiming no more than Wordsworth and Blake claimed and won, but which in process of time was itself becoming a tyranny. The danger is that in their zeal they become infected by a passion for purposeless and exhausting experiment, that they cast away what is precious merely because it is old, and welcome any vagary or fashion only because it is new. In the America of Whitman’s prime, it was comparatively easy to renounce culture and the past and “ stand in his place with his own day.” We have not yet seen any

proof that the feat is possible among the established and traditional civilisations of Europe or in that of the United States of the twentieth century, every day becoming more aware of its essential unity with European culture.

## IV.

Even a superficial reader must be struck, when he turns from Tennyson or Swinburne, by a certain lack in modern poetry, the exact nature of which he may be at some loss to determine. As he reads *The Dream of Fair Women* or *The Hymn to Proserpine*, he feels himself bound to the past; the echoes of many voices, long since dead, are ringing in his ears, by which he is subtly reminded of the great heritage of fact and fancy, of history and romance, to which the poet has fallen heir. He can hardly help realising the continuity of literature which links Swinburne to Shelley, Browning to Landor, Tennyson to Wordsworth, Rossetti to Coleridge, and which, bridging the Augustan ages, unites the Romantics and the Elizabethans, Shakespeare and Milton and Chapman, and these last and the eighteenth century to the classics and the Bible. He will see how the same coinage is current in them all and he will find not only, as Professor Grierson showed in his inaugural address at Edinburgh, that the literary background is the same, but that there is a common historical, philosophical and scientific body of allusions, "which an English writer could assume that his audience would understand, and on an understanding of which the full appreciation of his work depended."

But does this hold true of modern poetry? By what shadowy recollections or obvious allusions are we carried back to all that is precious in our literature? We can

divide contemporary poets roughly into three groups, according to their attitude to the past. First, and—for our purpose—least interesting are those who have not recognised the revolution, loyalists to the old régime, Mr. Sturge Moore, Dr. Bridges, Mr. Doughty, Sir William Watson—to name the more important. Their best poetry, often great and beautiful and sufficiently differentiated by style and metrical experiment from the work of their predecessors, is in many respects a continuation of Victorianism. They stand apart from the main body of their fellows, appealing to a very limited circle and influencing not at all the work of their age.

The second group are the extreme Whitmanists who have rejected the traditional background utterly and attempt to "stand in their place with their own day," to be new, vital and actual. Mr. Siegfried Sassoon, Mr. Carl Sandburg, Mr. T. S. Eliot and Mr. Osbert Sitwell are pre-occupied with the present ; in refusing neither the ugly nor the prosaic, they claim that this background of theirs is all-inclusive and catholic. But for many reasons, and not least because of the very human proneness of reformers to carry their reforms to extremes and to reject whatever has a savour of the older school, it is the most restricted background a poet has ever had. For the "dead poets, philosophs, priests" have, by their priority in time, seized on all the beautiful and gracious things and left the modern Whitmanists only the rubbish and sordidness of modern life. Making a virtue of necessity, therefore, our realists have created a new, if not beautiful, background from life as it is lived in bars and theatres and studios and slums, from the popular science of the cheap magazine, from the topics of journalism, from the urgent creed of the week, from machinery and railways,

"Box - cars, clocks, steam - shovels, churns, pistons,  
boilers, scissors—

Oh, the sleeping slag from the mountains, the slag-  
heavy pig-iron will go down many roads,

They will stab and shoot with it, and make butter and  
tunnel rivers and mow hay in swathes, and slit  
hogs and skin beefeves, and steer airplanes across  
North America, Europe, Asia, round the world."

It is a background amazingly different from that against which all our previous literature has been set : we feel that we are divorced from our past, and the wrench is painful after the habit of a lifetime. But it is an inevitable result of modern education with its smatterings and dilettantism. The age of humanism is gone and that of scientists and the half-educated has succeeded.

"Art," says Mr. George Moore, "is merely the embodiment of the dominant influence of the age." Art, we may say, is the essence of civilisation ; it is evolutionary, it is rooted in tradition. For no artist has ever worked without a tradition, because no artist writes or fashions without having read or seen. Even Walt Whitman, rejecting respectfully the past and its treasures, was but

"scorning the base degrees  
By which he did ascend."

And poetry, even were it to echo no earlier work and to have no background,—if we suppose for a moment that such a thing could exist—is itself based on the memory of likenesses and contrasts, which is personal tradition, and from which similes and metaphors are derived. But we know that of all his memories, the poet rejoices as completely in his recollection of the passions and volitions of his poetic

brethren as he does in the passions and volitions of himself : for as spontaneous a poet as Keats, to take but one example, required the precedent of Spenser to reveal to himself what he was. Quite apart, too, from the poet's or artist's personal indebtedness to his predecessors for inspiration and guidance, he is bound to the past for other reasons, since no artist works without remembering that he is addressing an audience that has read and seen and has presumably a memory, a knowledge of acquired facts, emotions and experiences, not unlike his own, and a familiarity with literature and art not very different from that which he has acquired ; and since no artist works without employing an idiom common to himself and his audience. All art is thus conditioned as much by the fact of the audience as by the capacity of the artist ; and the audience, in its relation at least to art and literature, is the creature of its traditions, moral, artistic, historical. Nor is the poet's task—for it is with him we are chiefly concerned—one of announcing in a few colourless words the purport of his thought. For poetry is not an exact science, nor is the poet's emotion capable of graphic representation. The poetic emotion, of which is born poetry, is an infinitely subtle and elusive thing : it demands for its expression every resource of language, every cadence by which a recollection can be summoned, every echo that can make more perfect in the reader's mind the repetition of the tone of the poet's. For this reason, it is a creative emotion which makes a synthesis of all past experience, all that the poet in the ecstasy of intuition knows to be his and theirs to whom he would speak, and which makes all that experience bear on the illustration of one theme, compelling all things to be its own for the purposes of art. If, then, the poet speak the language of his hearers, why may he not

also use the body of received opinions and common knowledge, the accepted moral judgments whether for approbation or reprobation, the conventions of thought but above all the literary atmosphere, as it were, which poet and audience alike inhale, when by his use of these he elucidates his meaning and his emotion ? Language itself, so long as it is a living organism, is in a continual flux. The distinctions of thought are becoming ever nicer, the varieties of experience ever richer ; and language, as a vehicle of thought, must accommodate itself to the new demands made upon it. It is a process in which each one of us is unconsciously but daily engaged, changing imperceptibly the sounds, inflection, syntax, enlarging the compass, consolidating the gains and rejecting the obsolete. It is the poet, then, who, exulting in an illumination which can never be more than imperfectly understood by others, does more than anyone else to extend the possibilities of utterance by his happy violence, by continuing along the line already adopted by the language, and by prophetic anticipations of a later development : the poet stands ever at the outposts of thought and would ever push on into the unknown. But language is only a part of tradition. And tradition is no more stable than language : indeed it would be no paradox to say that so far from language being a department of tradition, it is rather the latter which is a division of language, if we use that term in the broad sense of a vehicle for thought. Speech and tradition, we would say, together make up language. For speech, the spoken or written symbols of ideas, is a mechanical device, and tradition is, as it were, the informing spirit : it is the colour in the picture of which speech is the outline. It is tradition, the tacit assumptions of civilised existence, the conventions of thought and the body of received opinions

and common knowledge, as we have called it above, which fills the gaps of utterance. As a department of that broad language of communication, it is subject to very much the same forces as speech is. And again it is the poet who contributes most to the change and who rebels just as much against the tyranny of too conservative a tradition as against the inertia of too sluggish a speech idiom.

In rejecting all past literature, therefore, the poet is doing himself a double wrong. All that men have felt and suffered he should know, but, by the very limitations of his nature, he cannot have in himself the equivalent of generations. A poet, Wordsworth declared, was "a man—endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul than are supposed to be common among mankind." But if he shut himself up in the impenetrable walls of his own complacency, and scorn the very world of fashion in which he lives, and is affected by a perpetual languor at every sensation but his own intimate moods, is he any longer a poet even in aspiration, far less in achievement? And by what criterion has the literature of the past to be declared obsolete? It was initially based on human experience and it still constitutes, for all who can read poetry with profit, one sphere of their experience. Poetry is not the record of sensations peculiar to one man or to two: but it is a magic reading of the experience of all men; it is something, not trite, which finds an echo in the hearts of all; it is that which, wherever it appears, in Cowley or Benlowes, Browning or Lycophron, "though not obvious, is upon the first production acknowledged to be just." Every individual perhaps has certain memories which no one else possesses, but poetry is based, as it were, on the common memory of the race. We cannot imagine

a time when poets had not a mythology and an unwritten literature to draw from. Each generation has had a richer storehouse than the preceding, and each, too, has discovered new felicities of expression and illustration which have become new experiences, possessions of that racial mind which persists, though individual poets die. For every comfort of life, for every victory over the waywardness of the inanimate world, the poet, along with all men, is indebted to dead inventors and craftsmen (as Mr. Francis Burrows acknowledges),

“ He who shaped the flint and bound to axe  
 And arrow first ; who made the thread of flax  
 And hemp to weave ; and he who to the plough  
 Harnessed and tamed the bull and milked the cow . . .  
 And he who said : ‘ These are my children, these ;  
 My blood between them and their enemies ’ ; . . .

he who dreamed a strange dream in the night,  
 And from his rushes springing swat with fright,  
 But thought and said with open eyes, ‘ Tis beauty,’  
 And terror left him. Those who spoke of duty,  
 Mercy and truth, and taught the undying soul,  
 And many more.”

As a man the poet accepts the material advances of civilisation. Why then does he, a manipulator of words, decline to make use of an earlier writer’s victories over the stubbornness of vocables and the recalcitrancies of thought, as a new *point de départ*? Indeed the science, philosophy and imagination of the past are so woven into the warp and woof of our language that the wonder rather is how Mr. Eliot and Mr. Carl Sandburg mean to preserve their

thoughts at all, in words that have no echoes, than that they should be daring enough to make the attempt.\*

The work of these writers marks the limit of the reaction against romanticism and the past. Perhaps it is a cult, the significance of which we are apt to exaggerate, owing to the strident professions of its not very numerous and not very important followers. For the great body of our younger poets, in whose hands lies the future of English poetry, are trying to establish a compromise between the Whitmanists and the old loyalists. They feel that poetry had become too bookish, too dependent on reminiscences, like a decayed family whose best part is in the ground. They would transfuse into poetry new blood from the romance of actuality and nature, but, at the same time, they try never to forget its high and noble traditions inherited from the great ones of the past. That all the attempts, however, are neither successful nor deserving of success is plain, for much of the constructive work after the collapse of Victorianism has necessarily been fantastic experiment.

This is not altogether, or even to any marked extent, the blame of the poets themselves, but is symptomatic of something deeper which we have occasionally hinted at before. For we are made thereby only the more intensely aware of the humanism of which our previous literature was the finest flower. Our poets to-day feel that they sing to a different world, a world which has no longer received the generous education of the humanities. There is not now

\* "The half-brained creature to whom books are other than living things may see with the eyes of a bat and draw with the fingers of a mole his dullard's distinction between books and life: those who live the fuller life of a higher animal than he, know that books are to poets as much part of that life as pictures are to painters or as music to musicians, dead matter though they may be to the spiritually still-born children of dirt and dullness who find it possible to live while dead in heart and brain."—Swinburne's *Dedicatory Epistle to T. Watts-Dunton* (1904).

a prescribed course of study which, humane and comprehensive, provides a familiar background for all, but instead such a variety of subjects that the pupil is compelled to select a few, merely for utilitarian reasons. There is no longer a body of knowledge that is a communal possession.

## V.

The same specialisation has reacted on poetry in two ways : it has either broken it up into verse with a very restricted appeal or impoverished its background. Some of our poets are designing new backgrounds for themselves or are renovating old ones which had lost favour. Mr. Yeats and "A. E." for example, our symbolists, have chosen the untrod realms of Irish tale and romance. Many have gone to the East, J. E. Flecker to the lands of The Thousand and one Nights, and he has been followed by Mr. E. Hamilton Moore in *The Fountain of Ablution*. Mr. Aldington has gone on to China and Mr. Binyon to Japan, and Rupert Brooke in a few pieces to the Pacific, while all the regions between are the province of Mr. E. P. Mathers. Some have chosen other out-of-the-way settings and distant dates. Mr. C. B. Pallen has attempted a drama of fifth century Antioch, and at least two poets—Mr. Sardius Hancock and Mr. R. H. Foster—have struck new, yet barren ground in Anglo-Saxon England. One—Mr. Brooke—greatly daring, has contrived a new Camelot, more barbaric and realistic than the dream-city of Arthurian legend. There is, too, a group of vigorous poets who go back to the youth of the universe. One or two, Mr. Fausset in *The Healing of Heaven* and Sir William Watson in *The Superhuman Antagonists*, have invented new myth-

ologies, or else won some sort of assent from their readers by using a few familiar names for a new myth : while Mr. Gordon Bottomley's *Babel*, *The Gate of the God* and Mr. Austin Clarke's *The Fires of Baäl* elaborate themes from the Pentateuch.

The sciences and the new creeds are not without their poets. There are many poems, for example, which are the literary echoes of the amazing interest in psychology and psycho-analysis, in the work of Mr. Horace Shipp and Mr. H. S. Vere Hodge : Miss Alberta Vickridge, too, and Miss Meynell seem at times to be working out problems of the ego suggested by the same studies. There have been books for anglers and golfers, songs for colonists, verses for the fleet, and, since Mr. Kipling began it, a considerable corpus of barrack-room ballads. Theosophy has been pillaged by an anonymous woman writer in *Great Ganga the Gurn*, and Christian Science has been versified by a Mr. Haworth-Booth. We have had, also, *Poems from Beyond* by a medium, and, if we remember rightly, supposed spirit communications from Shakespeare. Nor in this paragraph must we forget the poetical coteries for the propagation of mild literary heresies.

The other method of obtaining the necessary background is by falling back on nature and the life we are leading. Never in our literature has the natural been totally ignored ; but now, in the absence of other more literary sources, it occupies a larger space and sometimes, notably in the poetry of women, it is almost the only discoverable outlook. The greater intimacy of treatment and the healthy, unquestioning enjoyment of nature, which mark off the work of the moderns from that of Tennyson or Wordsworth, will be discussed later. Here it will be sufficient to note specialisation again at work, disintegrating what had been

to Wordsworth a single background into a variety of vistas. We can see the degree to which the scientific discoveries of last century, after having ousted the traditional science of two thousand years, are themselves becoming, as Wordsworth had foreseen, part of the new background. Tennyson had been one of the first to find in the biology and geology, botany and entomology and astronomy of his day a direct inspiration and a theme. To-day these are all accepted features of the background and have their more or less devoted poets. Mr. Davies and Edward Thomas prefer, perhaps, the small perfections of flower and butterfly. But Mr. Kipling is at home rather with the immensities of the geologist, the seven seas, the grinding iceberg, the mountain ranges and the plains. Astronomy has found utterance in the cosmic verse, abundant and, as a rule, impressive. The emigration to the stars, it is true, has made some light-headed who think to find sublimity and poetry, if they talk enough about comets and the Pleiades. We get this from America :

“ Oh, subtle is the sap athrill,  
Athletic is the glad uplift,  
A portion of the cosmic will,  
I pierce the planet drift.”

*Sic itur ad astra.* But there are others, Robin Flower, Mr. Robert Graves, with Mr. Hardy at the top. His lyrics are acted out against no background but the stars ; they are the records of a heart in the void, where time has no meaning or place.

Science has not merely provided a vaster canvas and filled it with every detail, great and infinitely small, in heaven and earth, but it has also deepened the stage enormously by searching into the history of the human

race, back through time and history to prehistory and eternity. Our poets are seeking the natural man, stripped of all conventions, and nature unadorned and unpoetised. It is a quest for the primitive, a longing to get back. We are not sure that this reaction from the complications and sophistication of Victorianism is not a pervasive tendency through all art and thought. Some are finding comfort and a new refuge from ennui in primitive animism. Others, with more reason, are emphasising the value of fundamental instincts and intuitions, which had been covered up by over-civilisation, as clues to the truth. Prophets among our publicists cry for a revival of guilds or some still earlier society. In the plastic arts, the traditional technique began to pall and the artists have been seeking a diversion in an affected simplicity : and the features which were the result of imperfect achievement are now sought as an end in themselves. The tools and the skill have reached perfection ; but, with a perverted ingenuity, the more advanced artist refuses to give the best of which he is capable, sometimes by neglecting the technique which is his to use, sometimes by imitating anew primitive work, sometimes by deliberate carelessness and even by the expenditure of more time and trouble than would have sufficed to produce a more perfect result. This is why quite recently the meagre content of negro sculpture was amusing the sophisticated. There is, moreover, a group of painters who have rejected all chiaroscuro ; and, in the newer schools, we feel that the artistic conscience has been deliberately blunted, to a degree impossible among the cave-dwellers of Auvergne. A few years ago " barbaric " jewellery had a flare of popularity and still the worship of " decorative " fabrics and uncomfortable antiques proceeds. Even architecture has been infected,

and the suburbs spattered with houses which look "old and quaint," to harry once more an innocent phrase.

The cult of the imperfect has affected rather the form than the content of the arts, and, as we shall see, poetry has not escaped. But in poetry the simplification of motif has more features of interest. The Victorian pre-occupation with the civilised man, his politics and social functions and hypersensitiveness, has been put aside for the essential, fundamental emotions of man as man. While some sort of evolutionary theory was still unaccepted, Darwinism had something revolting in it to the delicate susceptibilities of the Victorians, standing on the utmost verge of time and refinement. But, despite many shrewd blows against their self-satisfaction, only Meredith and Hardy among them acquiesced and sought a new orientation. Now, by the light of anthropology and psychology, the poets have discovered that a vast range of the mind, vocal only in an age from which no literary monuments remain, can still be inviting to us, when we have grown tired of the involution of civilised emotions. It is as if civilisation were a ladder near the top of which the Victorians were complacently stationed and, unable to advance, the Philistines from whose "rotting"\*\* and intemperate sophistication we may, in certain similar sophisticated moods, derive an illegitimate pleasure, have started flouting and blaspheming to descend from the Victorian level and to go counter to the usual upward trend. But

\* Professor Saintsbury defines "rotting" thus:—"A habit of adopting and expressing views likely to shock simple folk, of ostentatiously flouting popular morality and conventional reverence, etc.; and of resorting on every possible occasion to what Tourguénieff—marking and hitting the game early—called 'the reversed platitude'. The thing has probably always been a measles of cleverish undergraduates; but it only recently became an endemic *lues* among grown-up folk."

many others have dropped to the foot of the ladder and are finding, in the primitive that had no singer, an unexhausted novelty.

We have, for example, Miss Cornford in *Pre-existence* bridging the gulf between now and the prime, and, by the identity of a fundamental pleasure in the sun and the sea, feeling herself one with some pre-pelasgian woman :

“ The grains of sand so shining small  
Soft through my fingers ran :  
The sun shone down upon it all,  
And so my dream began.

“ How all of this had been before ;  
How ages far away  
I lay on some forgotten shore  
As here I lie to-day.

\* \* \* \* \*

“ I have forgotten whence I came,  
Or what my home might be,  
Or by what strange and savage name  
I called that thundering sea.

“ I only know the sun shone down  
As still it shines to-day,  
And in my fingers long and brown  
The little pebbles lay.”

Mr. Sturge Moore has used the same apprehension of a shadowy recollection of the past in *Aforetime*. And Mr. de la Mare with a fine rapture has seen the unity of all life :

“ Very old are we men ;  
Our dreams are tales  
Told in dim Eden  
By Eve’s nightingales ;

We wake and whisper awhile,  
 But, the day gone by,  
 Silence and sleep like fields  
 Of amaranth lie."

These emotions of the real man and the human race persist through all history and the destruction of civilisations, the ruin of whose cities and empires, Tyre and Troy and Atlantis, has inspired many of our poets :

" Ah God ! how many hast Thou seen,  
 Cities that are not and have been  
 By silent hill and idle bay."

Some poets—Mr. Hodgson, Mr. Squire, and others—would recapture freshness and escape from over-refinement, in the passions of animals. Still more have gone to the youth of the world when

" Eve, with her basket, was  
 Deep in the bells and grass  
 Wading in bells and grass  
 Up to her knees."

Mr. Gordon Bottomley, too, in *Babel*, has found poetry in the old primitive narrative. But Mr. Burrows in *The Unforgotten*, quoted above, and Mr. W. J. Turner in *The Caves of Auvergne* have gone back to palæolithic man, and Mr. Turner in *A Ritual Dance* to a stage of development later, but equally crude :

" Out of the forest glide hundreds of spear-holding shadows,  
 In smooth dark ivory bodies their eyeballs gleaming,  
 Forming a gesturing circle beneath the Moon.  
 The bright-eyed shadows, the tribe in ritual gathered,

Are dancing and howling, the embryo soul of a nation :  
In loud drum - beating monotonous the tightly -  
stretched skins  
Of oxen that stared at the stars are singing wild  
pæans."

Mr. Malloch in a series of lyrics called *Vision* has followed the evolution of man from the primitive brute. Anthropology, too, has proved its right to a place in the poet's farrago.

Sometimes it is by the child who retains much of the simplicity possessed in part by the savage, and by its very detachment poetical, that the poets hope to renew the youth of their art. Miss Alberta Vickridge in *The Sea Gazer* has sought to recall her childish thoughts when dreaming over the sea, exactly as Miss Cornford has done with the primitive woman's feelings which were repeated in her. The attempt to achieve the child's point of view, to realise the visionary gleam, was never so persistent as it is to-day, perhaps has never been deliberately made before. But since *Peter Pan*, the epic of the child in all of us, was written, there has been an abundant literature for and about and by children. We have Sir James Barrie, Lord Grey of Falloden and Mr. Chesterton each introducing the work in prose or verse of precocious children. Mr. Edmund Dulac, Mr. Rowntree and Mr. Rackham have, in some of their most exquisite work, been giving us quite as much their reading of the imagination and humour in children as their own manifestation of these. We have had ere this story-tellers and artists for the child ; but they have, as a rule, sought, with such happy exceptions as Lewis Carroll and Kate Greenaway, to produce an immature man, a moral monster from their victims. Children have been

regarded often as suitable material for experimental pedagogues, psychologists and moralists. But to-day the philosopher and the psychologist are rather the pupils than the instructors of the child. And when Edward Thomas says in *The Brook*:

“ A grey flycatcher silent on a fence  
And I sat as if we had been there since  
The horseman and the horse lying beneath  
The fir-tree-covered barrow on the heath,  
The horseman and the horse with silver shoes,  
Galloped the downs last. All that I could lose  
I lost. And then the child’s voice raised the dead.  
‘ No one’s been here before,’ was what she said  
And what I felt, yet never should have found  
A word for, while I gathered sight and sound,”

he is expressing a modern belief in the profundity of the child, a belief that in the child there is something which the adult mind, if it possesses it at all, has only in a moribund state, an intuition, a capacity, an apprehension, which is more akin to that of the poet himself than any quality he finds in grown men.

Like Wordsworth, we also have learned the perennial novelty of peasant life and its possession of the fundamental simplicity that we have lost. But, unlike Wordsworth, our poets do not philosophise about it. Mr. Patrick Chalmers in *Pipes and Tabor*s gives us the jovial freedom of sport and rural pleasures, while no one has drawn better than Mr. Blunden the life of the villager, acted out, as Mr. Hardy’s novels are, against the faithfully copied face of nature, not with any Theocritean idealising, but with the reality which completely separates the modern pastoralism from the ancient.

These are illustrations of the intense concern with the reincarnation or resuscitation of the primitive. It is Mr. Bottomley who has enunciated consciously the theory behind it all, in *To Iron-founders and Others*:

“ When you destroy a blade of grass  
    You poison England at her roots :  
Remember no man’s foot can pass  
    Where evermore no green life shoots.

\* \* \* \* \*

“ Your worship is your furnaces  
    Which, like old idols, lost obscenes,  
Have molten bowels ; your vision is  
    Machines for making more machines.”

This is the revolt against industrialism and modern gregariousness with their regularity, inhumanity and ugliness. There are many figures symbolical of the longing for a simpler life away from cities and factories—Mr. Hodgson’s old gipsy man, Mr. Masefield’s happy vagabond and even the anaemic Pierrot and Columbine, who are the peculiar friends of no one poet but condescend to many. And it has given rise to the literature of the open road, so heartily sung by Mr. Chesterton :

“ My friends, we will not go again or ape an ancient rage,  
Or stretch the folly of our youth to be the shame of age,  
But walk with clearer eyes and ears this path that  
    wandereth,  
And see undrugged in evening light the decent inn of  
    death ;  
But there is good news yet to hear and fine things to  
    be seen,  
Before we go to Paradise by way of Kensal Green.”

Perhaps the realists themselves are unconsciously and inarticulately crying for an escape from the very fascination which has enslaved them.

## VI.

After the war of religion and science which filled the middle years of the Victorian age with controversy and despair, there has followed in our days an alliance, and we want another Blake to celebrate the marriage of these apparent irreconcilables, at which ceremony Dean Inge and Professor Arthur Thomson and Sir Oliver Lodge have assisted without being reviled as their predecessor, Bishop Colenso, was some decades before. For to the modern mind there is no essential opposition between the respective claims of idealism and realism. But when geology and biology were regarded as the enemies of whatsoever things were pure and lovely and of good report, the poets of Victorianism naturally withdrew from the more uncritical and enthusiastic universality of Shelley and Byron into a kind of prudish morality which alternated with liberal ecclesiasticism ; but, fascinated in spite of themselves, they snatched a fearful joy from secret exchanges with the forbidden science. Clough and Arnold hoped in their anguish that there was a higher synthesis ; and though Tennyson in his old age caught a glimpse of it, it was Tennyson the Victorian who, in the agony of a baffled hope, saw "Nature red in tooth and claw."

With the eternal hopefulness of man, however, our modern poets have emerged once again from despair into light and acquiesce in the findings of science without yielding a particle of their hope. This is not an age of

scepticism, of rejection of ultimate belief ; and if man is now more divided against himself, more a victim of his internal conflicts, he is conscious, as he has never been before, of the unity of creation. The poets have reached a point of view from which to observe the external world, which it has taken centuries to attain. The Romantics went with profound reverence to nature as to an awful teacher ; the Victorians, when they were not holding an autopsy on the scientists' victim, advanced little on the Romantics' position. It was reserved for the poets of this age to make nature a friend with whom one might talk and jest. The familiarity with what Mr. Nichols calls

“ the friendly company  
Of the huge universe ”

is extraordinary. There was more than a hint of this happy intimacy earlier, in Browning's *Englishman in Italy* for example. But all of the modern poets are at home in the world ; they talk of it as one might of a curious character or an old friend. How lovingly Edward Wyndham Tennant writes of the Downs, almost as if he and they were brothers :

“ How shall I tell you of the freedom of the Downs ?  
You who love the dusty life and durance of great towns,  
And think the only flowers that please embroider ladies'  
gowns,

How shall I tell you ?

How shall I tell you of the Avon's sweeping flow  
With the pollards like old henchmen in a sage and solemn  
row,  
And the silver water-cuts that shine when thymy breezes  
blow ?

How shall I tell you ? ”

And Mr. Robert Nichols' *Full Heart* thus communes with the universe :

“ Long after I am dead, ended this bitter journey,  
 Many another whose heart holds no light  
 Shall your solemn sweetness, hush, awe, and comfort  
 O my companions, Wind, Waters, Stars, and Night.”

To some, nature is more than a companion<sup>1</sup>; it is identified with themselves. Miss Vickridge is one of those

“ Whose souls must hear in every wind that blows  
 Our own songs, sung again in fitful bars ;  
 Who mourn our own deaths in the fading rose,  
 And meet our own eyes in the yearning stars.”

If their joy in nature is deep, how much deeper is the sympathy with the dumb brotherhood of created things ? There are now no imperfect sympathies, no antipathies for the toad or newt or viper. Mr. Hodgson has thought as *The Bull* could think, if it were dowered with thought. And the kinship of man and brute is almost painfully poignant in Mr. James Stephens' cry for the trapped rabbit in *The Snare* :

“ And I cannot find the place  
 Where his paw is in the snare ;  
 Little one ! Oh ! little one !  
 I am searching everywhere.”

Rupert Brooke, too, who caught up in himself all the tendencies of his day better than any other poet, with a sympathy almost as intense sorrows for the lonely stars :

“ I, remembering, pitied well  
 And loved them, who, with lonely light,  
 In empty infinite spaces dwell,

Disconsolate. For, all the night,  
I heard their thin gnat-voices cry,  
Star to faint star, across the sky."

In *The Great Lover*, with a comradeship like Whitman's for all kinds of things, the mere prosaic, inanimate things, utensils and conveniences and commodities, he speaks not for himself only but for his age that sees a glory in the commonplace and has said to the worm, Thou art my brother and my fellow: a piety which constrains Mr. Chesterton to exclaim

" ' What of vile dust ? ' the preacher said.  
Methought the whole world woke,  
The dead stone lived beneath my foot,  
And my whole body spoke.

" ' You that play tyrant to the dust,

    . . .  
' You, too, O cold of clay,  
Eater of stones, may haply hear  
The trumpets of that day,

" ' When God to all His paladins  
By his own splendour swore  
To make a fairer face than heaven  
Of dust and nothing more.' "

There is then a discoverable beauty in all things, a beauty in familiar objects and a romance in what we have taken for granted. It is thus that Mr. Davies commemorates a great natural coincidence of commonplaces :

" Sweet Chance, that led my steps abroad,  
Beyond the town, where wild flowers grow—  
    A rainbow and a cuckoo, Lord,  
How rich and great the times are now! . . .

A rainbow and a cuckoo's song  
 May never come together again ;  
 May never come  
 This side the tomb."

The new social union of man and beast and clod, and the marvel of beauty in the prosaic are happy presages for the future. Our poets have again heard the harmony of the world and are once more singing *The Song of Honour* :

" The song of men divinely wise  
 That look and see in starry skies  
 Not stars so much as robins' eyes,  
 And when these pale away  
 Hear flocks of shining pleiades  
 Among the plums and apple trees  
 Sing in the summer day."

The hope for the new poetry is in exact proportion to this love of the soil. It is a passion for the earth, the rhythm of the cool, damp earth with its old familiar flowers :

" Bees' balsams, feathery southernwood and stocks,  
 Fiery dragons'-mouths, great mallow leaves  
 For salves, and lemon plants in bushy sheaves,  
 Shagged Esau's Hands with five green finger-tips !  
 Such sweet old names are ever on their lips."

It is as surely a growth of the soil and as fresh as a mushroom ; it is the poetry of Caliban, finding an adequate theme or setting in the procession of the seasons, in the eternal grass, in the oaks and hills, and the natural man of rural Britain. Such is the new pastoralism of Mr. Hardy and Mr. Blunden and Mr. Helston, the Wordsworthian |

creed with the moral and the philosophy left out. It is not in the least a conventional or affected passion, not didactic or sentimental, or in quest of vague romance and ecstasy, for it is founded on absolute truthfulness and familiarity. If it has not the sublimity of the Romantics, it has a greater realism and objectivity ; if it lacks their philosophy, it has an even more intimate understanding.

## VII.

For this reason few of our poets have much to say about Italy and the Alps, and even those who wander the East, fascinated for a while, cry like J. E. Flecker :

“ Oh, shall I never never be home again ?  
Meadows of England shining in the rain  
Spread wide your daisied lawns ; your ramparts green  
With brier fortify, with blossom screen  
Till my far morning.”

Our poets to-day are, for the most part, thoroughly stay-at-home. They are English backwaters and meadows and English flowers that Dr. Bridges and Mr. R. A. F. Nicholl and Mr. Bliss love. They are English lanes that Mr. Freeman and Mr. Blunden wander through and the hunting counties over which Mr. Masefield’s horses gallop and his foxes scout. Our poetry is now English or Scottish or Irish to the very core; nay, it is the expression of a patriotism intensely parochial within the wider nationalism ;

“ I will pack and take a train,  
And get me to England once again !  
For England’s the one land I know,  
Where men with Splendid Hearts may go ;

And Cambridgeshire, of all England,  
The Shire for Men, who Understand ;  
And of *that* district I prefer  
The lovely hamlet Grantchester.”

And here is Mr. Kipling giving the reason for this double devotion :

“ God gave all men all earth to love,  
But since our hearts are small,  
Ordained for each one spot should prove  
Beloved over all ;

“ Each to his choice, and I rejoice  
The lot has fallen to me  
In a fair ground—in a fair ground—  
Yea, Sussex by the Sea ! ”

His voice is only one of the many—Mr. Belloc, Mr. Wilfrid Blunt, Miss Sheila Kaye-Smith, Mr. R. Thurston Hopkins, Arthur Bell—who have celebrated in prose or verse the same Downs. The Borders have their singer in Mr. H. J. Boyd and Essex its Mr. Arthur Cripps and many another corner of the three Kingdoms—Caithness, and Donegal, and Cornwall, and Teviotdale, and Aberdeen, and Lincoln—hitherto voiceless, has now its poet. In the characteristic flowers, in the suggestiveness of nomenclature, in the peculiarities of cliff and meadow-land, there are undreamt-of possibilities of freshness. Poets, too, have not been slow to see to what use dialect might be turned. Much of it is experimental and does not insist expressly on its parochialism. But Mr. Fletcher’s *Leet Livvy* has passed the experimental stage, and one of the most truthful of all the war poems is a poignantly sincere utterance in dialect of the love of home, no vague patriotism of imperialism but the love of

one's own folk and nook of the hills. It is Mr. Buchan's *Home Thoughts from Abroad*:

"Aifter the war, says the papers, they'll no be content at  
hame,  
*The lads that hae feucht wi' death twae 'ear i' the mud  
and the rain and the snaw,*  
*For aifter a sodger's life the shop will be unco tame ;*  
*They'll ettle at fortune and freedom in the new lands  
far awa'.*

No me !

By —— ! No me !

Aince we hae lickit oor faes  
And aince I get oot o' this hell,  
For the rest o' my leevin' days  
I'll mak a pet o' mysel'.

I'll haste me back wi' an eident fit  
And settle again in the same auld bit.

And oh ! the comfort to snowk again  
The reek o' my mither's but-and-ben,  
And wee box bed and the ingle neuk  
And the kail pat hung frae the chimney heuk ! "

This regionalism, which has its novelists like Mr. Hardy, Sir Hall Caine, and Mr. Philpotts, and its folklorists and antiquaries as well as its poets, promises much for the development of a new and vigorous poetry. We are flooded at present by coterie poetry from groups of towns-people who have casually drifted together and are held by no common inspiration or interest except mutual approval. Dialect and regional poetry is really a fresh growth of the soil ; its language is simplicity, its method is directness and its creed the oneness of nature and man. We have long been accustomed to the Irish School which, however,

is rather a nationalist group. We look forward to the development of regional cultures in other districts, as active as those of ancient Greece or Renaissance Italy.

## VIII.

Our conception of what constitutes beauty, like our manner of expressing it, is also traditional and is determined for us by our history, our mental outlook and our civilisation. For beauty, except in the abstract, Platonic sense, is a variable and relative term. Our art and our literature may, perhaps, have been too timid in the past, too slow to approve of new adventures in beauty. It is true that we have advanced far from the Greek belief that physical perfection and maturity alone were subjects worthy of art, or from the severe exclusiveness of the early Italian schools of painting. We have grudgingly admitted the possibilities of the ugly. But we have been chary of subscribing to the theory that all things may be made contributory to art and have especially hesitated to welcome as artistic themes the very pressing realities of our industrial civilisation. The present age, however, has made amends, if amends were needed, and the critic is faced with a great body of "realistic" art, which seems to reject beauty of form and content for the actual and photographic. Much of this realism is a healthy reaction against a convention which, if once valid, had by constant handling lost all the distinctness and ruggedness of reality. Yet, to one educated in the poetry of the past, the task which modern poets have set themselves of wringing romance from realism and beauty from industrial ugliness may seem an

impossible one ; poetry may seem to demand a certain detachment in place or time from the facts the poet employs, and he must see, as it were, through the haze of distance which blots out the impertinent and the insignificant. We believe, however, that among the many poets at work to-day and standing out from the few who, out of the alembic into which they squeezed ugliness, have got nothing but the ugly in return, not a few poetic minds have penetrated to the ideal behind the realistic and have succeeded in wringing romance from realism and beauty from industrial ugliness, and that there have been anticipations of this feat in earlier literature. Donne again and again has idealized the real and Burns and Dunbar have achieved the same in broader vein. But it was not until the nineteenth century that very much was done in this style. Hood's realistic work was the earliest of a long line ; the Pre-Raphaelites themselves, from many points of view, were realists. Browning, however, more than all, roused readers from their idylls and fading romance by Mr. Sludge and Bishop Blougram in their monologues, which were undoubtedly important historically, whatever we may think of their literary quality. *Up at a Villa, Down in the City* and *Childe Roland* more happily employ the details, realistic and grotesque, of experience for the expression of an intuition, undeniably poetic. The only sincere work of that much over-rated person, Oscar Wilde, was *The Ballad of Reading Jail* in which he showed the potentialities of the realistic for the expression of poignant emotion.

Later poets, our contemporaries, have not been slow to follow and to adapt the accurate observation of fact, which science has taught, to the uses of poetry. In certain respects, the moderns are nearer to Whitman than to Browning in their honesty of purpose ; the best of them

have done a real service by making poetry free of a vast new expanse to which the nineties had refused her access. It is refreshing, for example, to read Mr. Blunden's *Gleaning* or Mr. Padraic Colum's *The Old Woman of the Roads*, vivid as a Dutch picture and as true. Rupert Brooke, too, has learned to find a beauty undiscovered, unsuspected in the things we took for granted, in tea plates and "the strong crust of friendly bread," wet wind-swept roofs, "the keen unpassioned beauty of a great machine," "the cool kindliness of sheets," and "the rough male kiss of blankets". He does not see them, however, like Mr. Pound or Mr. Sandburg, in a feeble irrelevance, as meaningless, purposeless detail :

"I saw the stillness and the light,  
And you, august, immortal, white,  
Holy and strange ; and every glint  
Posture and jest and thought and tint  
Freed from the mask of transiency,  
Triumphant in eternity,  
Immote, immortal."

A younger poet than Brooke, a less sure artist, though no less intense and sensitive a soul, Wilfred Owen, has, by a process which defies analysis, bent to his purpose the loathsome details of war which we once thought intractable, the stench of wounds, the inertia of mud, the froth-corrupted lungs of the gas victim. His purpose is no cheap effort to produce a shudder ; he did not write *Mental Cases* or *Exposure* merely for the photographic realism. Let him tell his aim himself :

"The subject of it [his Book] is War, and the pity of War.  
The Poetry is in the pity.  
Yet these elegies are not to this generation  
This is in no sense consolatory.

"They may be to the next.  
All the poet can do to-day is to warn.  
That is why true Poets must be truthful."

"The Poetry is in the —," details, the realism, the ugliness? "The Poetry is in the pity." Something behind the mechanism that expresses it, something which can find full utterance only in the things which lacerate our souls, only in a seeming brutality which sears our deadness, more ugly than the remedy. "That is why the true Poet must be truthful," not because there is any virtue in a photograph, but because he must choose the symbols which best represent his emotion and his vision.

It would be untrue to say that Wilfred Owen has succeeded everywhere in producing poetry; many times his smoke smothers his flame. Like Mr. Sassoon, whose *Absolution*, however, and *The Death Bed* have poetical sinews, he wrote frequently too soon after the event. Often what he gives us is rather the raw material of poetry than the authentic product. But we doubt if any have been so true, so unforced, so unspoilt by the "cleverness" of many of the realists.

## IX.

Realism, however, in modern poetry is not all sincere. The vast majority of the realist poets are so, not from honest necessity but from perversity. They are over-conscious of reaction, revolutionaries who cannot away with any touch or flavour or echo or reminiscence of the old. They would dethrone all the old conventions and venerable moralities, good and bad. They have become as fastidious and queasy of beauty as the nineties were of the

smutch of the truth. Instead, therefore, of having the world as a field to roam in, these writers are like flies buzzing round a manure heap. Their sardonic and morbid selection of "realistic" subjects is, for all they can say, determined by revolt ; their motto is *nil admirari*. So far from being new, their work is the nausea of romance. Poetry we have always regarded as the memorial of a regulated emotion. But the poetry of the realists has little or no emotion ; they refuse to let themselves go, except in a very schoolboyish desire to shock honest susceptibilities for a meretricious effect. They accordingly fail to communicate their thoughts, if they have any, and, when they do pass them on, they leave the reader wondering why all this waste of paper on something not worth the saying. Mr. Masters in his *Spoon River Anthology* has written cleverish epitaphs of the quality common in parlour games ; but we would not give one tale of Tchekhov for the whole collection. When the realists have an emotion—it is usually a phase of boredom—too often it is one which, by its very nature, cannot be communicated, a flitting sense-impression of which nothing can be made. It is only occasionally, as in the amusing and intelligent realism of Mr. Harold Monro's *Journey* and *Solitude*, that emotions or impressions, never before described, are truly handed on. Far oftener we find that, though the idea may be clear enough to the artist, he cannot, by reason of its peculiarity to himself, make it intelligible to the reader.

It is not the science and the descriptions of modern town life which we dislike in the verse of the realists ; the true poet, as Whitman and Mr. Kipling have shown, can weave

" his spell

Where heart-blood beat or hearth smoke curled,  
With unconsidered miracle."

We do object to the subordination of poetry to science and the dull actualities. Poetry takes as its dominion all things and should be the slave of none. But,

“ What be those two shapes high over the sacred fountain,

Taller than all the Muses, and huger than all the mountain ?

On those two known peaks they stand ever-spreading and heightening ;

Poet, that evergreen laurel is blasted by more than lightning !

Look, in their deep double shadows the crown'd ones all disappearing !

Sing like a bird and be happy, nor hope for a deathless hearing !

‘ Sounding for ever and ever ? ’ pass on ! the sight confuses—

These are Astronomy and Geology, terrible Muses ! ”

wrote the poet of Victorianism thirty years ago and all we can do now is to include Psychology and Engineering among the terrible Muses. Science, it is true, has always been part of the background of literature, as in Dante and Donne : but their science was traditional ; it served for illustration, not for theme, and an allusion to it could be risked without any danger of being unintelligible. To-day, however, modern science and modern life are the tyrants of poetry, not its subjects : the terrible Muses have affrighted the gentler deities from their old haunts. It is, perhaps, a natural result of the scientific advance of the nineteenth century. The very poet of Victorianism himself did not a little to betray the citadel. Yet we are inclined to regard Whitman, and not Tennyson, as the

(DIRTY  
SCHOOL)

chief of the scientific school ; it was he who sang of the steam engine and of Brooklyn Bridge, who filled his verse with the throb of the piston and the whirr of machinery, with geography and unprecedented science of all kinds. More recent poet-scientists we have in plenty—Mr. Kipling, Mr. Gordon Bottomley, Rupert Brooke—but for them science and modern life are tributary provinces. The other realists—Mr. Kreymborg and Mr. Pound—are not yet freedmen of the empire of poetry.

The claim of Mr. Masters and his fellows is that they are true to life and its surroundings. If they are, their work will undoubtedly have some value as documents for the social history of the second decade of the twentieth century. If in the future some candidate for a doctorate in the University of Alaska chooses *The Mentality of the Allied Nations in the Great War* for his thesis, he might get a hint or two from certain curiosities of literature—Mr. Eliot's *Ara Vus Prec* (21s. at the Ovid Press), or Mr. Edgar Lee Masters' *Domesday Book*, a better bargain at 20s.—as he undoubtedly will find many suggestions in the pages of *Punch*. They illustrate well the modern perversity of thought, the paradoxicality which reverses all judgments and finds black white and white black, the exaggeration without which modern conversation is impossible, the painful cynicism in which contemporary hysteria conceals itself to avoid sentiment, the pococurantism and the general moral and æsthetic nihilism. But we cannot help asking the question, Are these poets indeed true to fact ? *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* begins thus :

“ Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherized upon a table.”

Was it truth to life which inspired Mr. Eliot to this effort or was it a determination at all costs to be original? Here is another simile from Mr. Eliot:

"I mount the steps and ring the bell, turning  
Wearily, as one would turn to say good-bye to Roche-  
foucauld  
If the street were Time and he at the end of the street,  
And I say, 'Cousin Harriet, here is the Boston Evening  
Transcript.'"

Really this jocoseness is very trying. From Mr. Sandburg we shall take the following:

"Passing through huddled and ugly walls,  
By doorways where women haggard  
Looked from their hunger-deep eyes,  
Haunted with shadows of hunger-hands,  
Out from the huddled and ugly walls,  
I came sudden, at the city's edge,  
On a blue burst of lake,  
Long lake waves breaking under the sun  
On a spray-flung curve of shore;  
And a fluttering storm of gulls,  
Masses of great grey wings  
And flying white bellies  
Veering and wheeling free in the open."

Truly we have seen as good things as this in a provincial newspaper, even when the journalist was not at his best. In the whole piece there is not one vivid epithet, not one inevitable: nor are we constrained in spite of ourselves by the truth of the picture.

*Dick has apparently missed the  
embodiment anterior in the original* D

## X.

To the present writer the fundamental error of these poets is that they believe art to be representative. So far, of all the arts, only music has been recognised as non-representative : but by what process of reasoning do we say that the *Vita Nuova* is representative ? Representative of what ? What have the *Stanzas Written in Desjection at Naples* or *The Ode to the West Wind* to do with representation ? They are undoubtedly symbolic ; and poetry, in so far as it is poetry, not verse,—even the most objective poetry—is in a sense a symbolical revelation of some transcendent emotion or idea which, seizing on observed and individual facts, relates particular experiences to a universal.

For the artist must of necessity be an idealist : it is an idea he sets out to communicate, to embody in various extensions ; and his idea is the intension, invisible, eternal and laid up in the heavens. For behind his creative work is an idea, as essential to him and to his poetry as the Platonic idea to the philosopher and his philosophy. The poet or maker is, as the words imply, a creative artist : and what he sees and feels, he sees and feels, not apart from the world, but against the whole background of things. He sees the merest detail in relation to the universe, though he may not express it in terms of the universe. His is the esemplastic power, “ the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.” The ultimate office of the artist is by an apt symbol to bring the eternal and infinite into the limits of the temporal and finite.

But many of the modern school are caught up in the

meshes of the present, they are entangled inextricably in its limitations, its pressing realities, its enslaving complications. Mr. Sassoon is preoccupied, like Mr. Carl Sandburg, with the material. But art is not an obsession : it is an escape, an emancipation from hampering manacles. It is not necessarily a flight to some impossible paradise of deathless beauty. But it is a process of selection and rejection, a selection of those factors which make more logical and complete the final result and a rejection of the complications. It is a simplification and a philosophising of life—which is what Matthew Arnold meant by calling it a “criticism of life.” Art is a synthesis, not an analysis.

The world of poetry need not be beautiful ; it may be as forbidding as the moor over which Childe Roland came to the Dark Tower, but it is a world only of significant facts. The realists attempt to draw a world no simpler than our own, in fact this very world. They collect but forget to reject, and are in consequence cumbered with small troublesome things which may be realistic but are irrelevant. The salient features are covered by a mass of accidentals. We have long since left behind the debate on the appropriate subjects for poetry. We are prepared to admit that there is nothing which is not susceptible of poetic treatment. Perhaps in reaction from the fastidiousness of the nineties, the modern poets have erred in the opposite way. As a rule the modern realist fails in the choice of significant details ; in his preoccupation with realism, he fails to withdraw himself sufficiently from the trees to see the wood, he fails to strike the line which would give the idea with the smallest possible accumulation of realistic particulars. The fine passion of the Greek sculptor which burned all the contributory detail away and left the final result, the em-

bodiment of an eternal idea, is never his. His brushwood and dead leaves are damp and the flame of his ardour too much smothered to fire the rubbish of his workshop. But let it be said that in certain poems of Wilfred Owen and at times in Mr. Sassoon and others, beauty, the beauty of perfect fitness, not of convention, has been wrung from the ugly and the sordid in a moment of like intuitive passion.

“What is essential in poetry,” says Mr. Middleton Murry in his excellent *Aspects of Literature*, “ . . . is an act of intuitive comprehension. . . . If a reaction to life has in itself the seeds of an intuitive comprehension, it will stand explication. If a young poet’s nausea at the sight of a toothbrush is significant of anything at all, except bad upbringing, then it is capable of being refined into a vision of life and of being expressed by the appropriate mechanism or myth. But to register the mere facts of consciousness, undigested by the being, without assessment or reinforcement by the mind is, for all the connection it has with poetry, no better than to copy down the numbers of one’s ‘bus-tickets.’” That there is a tendency among many of our poets “to register the mere facts of existence” is abundantly proved from the work of Mr. Eliot, Mr. Sandburg, Mr. Sassoon, and probably scores of others. We may take an example from Mr. Sandburg which was quoted some time ago in a review—it is part of a long description of an American “city”—

“ a spot on the map

And the passenger trains stop there  
And the factory smokestacks smoke  
And the grocery stores are open Saturday nights  
And the streets are free for citizens who vote  
And inhabitants counted in the census.  
Saturday night is the big night.

“ Main street runs through the middle of the town,  
And there is a dirty post office  
And a dirty city hall  
And a dirty railroad station.”

What is there here of poetical intensity ? And even if we grant a certain flutter of disgust, is the piece any more than a fairly, and only fairly, accurate, photographic description of a commonplace scene ? We admit that the poet has a right to his own subject if he can substantiate his claim in the result ; and this effort of Mr. Sandburg's may be a sincere enough effort to restore to poetry its grip on reality after the falsity of the nineties. But such lines might appear in a dull letter without exciting surprise : they might form part of a commercial traveller's report on the possibilities of a new journey : they would not strike us as having anything beyond very average vividness in a very average conversation. If Mr. Sandburg has described well,—we cannot admit more than the hypothesis,—the description, however admirable, is no sort of justification for calling his lines poetry. What constitutes poetry has long since been determined for us by such versifiers as Homer and Sophocles, Catullus and Goethe and Coleridge. They were the first in the field and they called themselves poets and their work poetry. There was no *a priori* significance in the word poetry : it is purely a term constructed after the event. If Mr. Sandburg, whom we have made the scapegoat, desires to be admitted to the fellowship of poets, he must present other credentials than he has yet offered. The essentials of poetry were settled long ago and for him to complain at his being refused the name of poet, even though he has written very pretty irregularities, is as ridiculous as for a tennis-player to request that his

stroke outside the court should be counted in because it was such a good return. Poetry, like tennis, makes certain demands, one at least of which essentials Mr. Sandburg does not provide. He may have many other non-essentials and many other superfluities of price but he must be content with another name than poet.

## XI.

We are, no doubt, more complex than the Greeks, and our art in consequence lacks the repose of their work which resulted from the ancient artist's concentration on the actual, not on the suggested, on the visible, not on the symbol. The content of modern thought is too vast, too subtle, for each phase to be adequately represented by a peculiar diagram. The combinations and permutations of figures which once completely represented all the variations and parentheses of thought have been exhausted, and we are now compelled to use symbols, brief suggestions, indications, what you will, of many ideas. We find that ideas group themselves, and to such a group we assign a symbol, as intelligible to the mind, educated in the modern world, as is an algebraical symbol to the mathematician. Our poetry, that is to say, is symbolic; no longer, if it ever was completely, representative. This is the true distinction between the classical and the romantic : this is behind all the definitions of these terms—Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's which says that some naturally attach more importance to form and others to colour, the classicists and the romantics respectively; or behind Pater's neat “ addition of strangeness to beauty, of curiosity to desire.” It is this fact also which distinguishes the Romantic Revival from the Augustan Age, and

Blake stands in the very forefront as the father of modern symbolism.

It is not that ancient art was poor in content or merely general and abstract. "Even the well-furnished classical scholar," says Miss J. E. Harrison in *Mythology and Monuments of Ancient Athens*, "pictures the Acropolis as a stately hill approached by the Propylæa, crowned by the austere beauty of the Parthenon, and adds to his picture perhaps the remembrance of some manner of Erechtheion, a vision of colourless marble, of awe, restraint, severe selection. Only Pausanias tells him of the colour and life, the realism, the quaintness, the forest of votive statues, the gold, the ivory, the bronze, the paintings on the walls, the golden lamps, the brazen palm-trees, the strange old Hermes hidden in myrtle leaves, the ancien stone on which Silenus sat, the smoke-grimed images of Athene, Diitrepheus all pierced with arrows, Kleoitas with his silver nails, the heroes peeping from the Trojan horse, Anacreon singing in his cups; all these, if we would picture the truth and not our own imagination, we must learn of, and learn of from Pausanias." This abundance and grotesqueness is more reminiscent of the precincts of a Hindu temple than coincident with our preconceived idea of the simplicity of ancient art. But the purpose behind all this was comparatively simple: each quaint statue, each acanthus leaf or leopard meant little more than it expressed—it was a representation only at one remove.

On the other hand, any typical piece of romantic art, the façade of Rheims, the porch of Saint Mark's, Dürer's *Knight, Le Roman de la Rose*, is a mass of symbolistic detail, of representations at two or three removes. It has not the repose, the directness, the simplicity and the self-containedness of ancient art because the medieval

mind had none of these things. The Greek regarded no other civilisation but his own : he had an unspeakable contempt for the barbarian : he had evolved a philosophic system which attempted to explain the phenomena of the universe. He was at ease in his own Zion ; and it is only in the tortured scepticism of the great tragic trio which, in itself, has something Hebraic rather than Hellenic in it, that the Greek mind sent out scouts into the vast abrupt surrounding his little world of thought. He was a daring speculator, it is true, but his world was limited. The medieval man, on the other hand, was faced by quite another universe. He never knew how far his little world extended. The culture about him was not sufficiently impressive to make him contemptuous of the civilisations of which he had heard but which he had not seen. His mind, therefore, went out on expeditions to Ultima Thule and Cathay, to Babylon and Trebizond. Around him were still, in not a little of their former splendour, the monuments of the ancient world. He thus never narrowed his world down, by contempt for an inferior society, to the limits of his own experience. There were wonders in the mountains of Caucasus and dragons in Prussia. There were devils and saints and fairies and powers to which even he could not give "a local habitation and a name." His old polytheistic instinct was forbidden by his faith in Christianity from the invention of gods ; but it conjured up goblins and fiends, partly from its own existing stock, partly from its attempts to explain. There was besides a medieval philosophy and cosmogony, strict and unyielding and appallingly logical : we find it made poetry in Dante. But this magnificent system, so complete and detailed, was no explanation for the average man : the scholastic philosophy was not interwoven with the medieval mentality as Greek

thought, taking that word in the broadest sense, was in some degree the common property of every Hellene. Moreover the system itself might well appal the thinking but not philosophic mind. The earth, hell, purgatory, the spheres of the planets and the fixed stars, the *primum mobile* and the Empyrean Heaven—even when they are mapped out—are something more than the Peloponnesus and Magna Græcia. The Greek might speculate about immortality and metempsychosis: but they were not certainties to him, as eternity, the joys of heaven and the torments of the damned were to the middle ages; and as even this terrifying map of space was unknown to most, it is almost impossible for us in the security of our reason and knowledge to imagine the blank wonder, liable at any time to fly into terror, which was the typical mental attitude of the medieval man. This man may not have thought as much as the ancient Greek: the facts of his positive knowledge, too, were fewer. But they were scattered over time, space and eternity, and all the uncharted oceans between he filled with imperfect fictions of the mind and shadowy powers, with fears and airy tongues, with hopes and anguish and wonder. Thus if his knowledge were less, his emotional experience, and, therefore, the emotional content of his mind were infinitely greater. He was confronted, then, with the problem of expression: the direct method was inadequate, the symbolical was compulsory.

We are just beginning to realise now that there has been no break with the middle ages but that there has been a steady progress in thought and a normal development, with a quickening of the pace when some contributory stream ran in. We have charted some of the oceans which the middle ages only feared. We have pushed back the boundaries of space, and time is to our maturer and more

capacious apprehensions vastly greater. We have found, too, the infinitely small in our search for the infinitely great. The positive knowledge of Dante is a very little thing before the body of our facts. Yet while the medieval mind would have been content with a few more peaks, each visible from the other, we are still as tormented by the unbridgeable gulfs between atom and atom, between minutia and minutia. Above all, the modern man has discovered himself: he has become painfully conscious of the ego which the ancient apprehended rather physically than psychologically and which the medieval mind, except in the introspection of isolated saints, hardly regarded as a problem, as a unit, independent of the community of monastery, guild or kingdom. To us, however, the problem above all others is ourselves. We have discovered unfathomable depths, inexplicable motives, irresistible impulses. If we are not appalled by the vastness and mystery of this unknown continent, as the mythopoetic primitive was in his world, yet we are perplexed, tormented, defied by it. To us, therefore, the science of sciences is not, as in the nineteenth century, biology or physics, but psychology, not the explanation of the forces about us but the exploration of the world within.

The romantic symbolism had been a tacit recognition of the inadequacy of language and thought to express to the full the contents of man's experience and his capacity for wonder, awe and admiration. With the Renaissance and its promise of an answer to many problems, came the discovery of the new continent of the soul. It is with the Renaissance that modern introspective art begins in any bulk and it has been growing in volume ever since, until to-day all art and literature is subjective in tendency. We do not deny the existence of lyrical and subjective poetry

before the Renaissance. The *Sonnets to Laura* and the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine would refute such a denial. Nevertheless the polytheistic mind of the ancient world was not introspective: the lyrical emotion of Catullus was physical rather than mental or psychic. And when the inward searching of the heart was beginning to be fostered by the Gospels, the Psalms, "the greatest record of man's communion with himself in the world," and by the *De Consolatione Philosophiæ*, the old world was toppling to its base, dragging with it its security of thought, its compactness and faith in itself. The dark and middle ages were too busy building their citadel from the ruins to trouble much about the mysteries of the soul; so that, despite certain famous exceptions, it is a fact that all medieval literature is objective: the "Journeys of the Soul" and the formal triolets and ballades of the fourteenth century have, for the most part, no claim to be considered as subjective or lyrical.

Modern art, on the other hand, has become more and more subjective. It is a fact true not merely of literature, but of the plastic arts and of music. The sculptors, Rombaux, Rousseaux, and some others have, as we said above, found the limits of their art too narrow. Tiring of the old statuesque attitudes, they have sought both in subject and execution a means of expressing their own emotions. The plastic artist, we admit, has always experienced an emotion or inspiration: but it was not independent of the subject, it was the creative emotion. The modern artist has a subjective state to express, quite apart from the theme on which he is at work, and it is often too complicated for the material he employs, unfettered by any form, and moving as yet in the void. He has the joy of creation: but the other is earlier and more insistent.

By the very materials in which he works, the sculptor is confined to a comparatively restricted range. But constantly in choice of theme and in treatment, still more in the execution, hurried, unfinished, nervous, we can see him looking for a symbol, or what he thinks a symbol, of some complex emotion, and attempting to make it permanent by his art. Painting has advanced still further in the direction of self-expression. Very little modern painting is concerned with historical or genre subjects. The painter chooses rather landscapes and seascapes which are regarded through a temperament. Naturally the old masters, Van Dyck or Rembrandt for example, were not without their moods, and they revealed themselves, though involuntarily, through them. In later art from Turner, who perhaps rather attuned his mood to that of nature than identified nature's with his own, through the Pre-Raphaelites and the Impressionists, Whistler and Corot, the Post-Impressionists, the Futurists, Cubists and whoever else is sufficiently differentiated from them to require a new name, the tendency has been to distil more and more of the artist's individuality and mood into his representations, to incorporate the world with his own mood. Art has become one great pathetic fallacy. No longer is the artist content to be the interpreter, the historian, the recorder, the impartial and eccentric spectator of the world. He is now the centre of his world, and to-day, so far as we can see, in the work of the Futurists and the Cubists art has become impossible by reason of the fact that the symbols and the point of view are peculiar to the artist and cannot be translated into any idiom intelligible to the spectator. It is the same phenomenon as has taken place in poetry.

The present is the age of dissection and of counting the atoms : Zeno has succeeded Parmenides. We are all

troubled by our consciousness of disparity and of multiplicity. We have shattered the microcosm : we have preached individualism and even now communism is a blind cry for unity : we are each and all torn asunder by the warring of the flesh against the spirit, of the conscious against the unconscious, of the reason against the will and who can say how many other discords in this age of specialisation ? It may be that the genial tolerant objectivity of Chaucer is no longer possible. It may be that, as the true epic has passed with the Heroic Age, so the age for all objective art is gone and that men are now too conscious of themselves and their own mental processes to be interested in the outside world, except in so far as it repeats themselves. It is certain at any rate that, at present, literature—the psychological and propagandist novel, the thesis play as well as poetry—is regarded as a means of self-revelation. Thus speaks a very modern poet, Mr. Olaf Baker in *The Tramp of Eternity* :

“ Buried among the brambles, the deep grass and the hemlock,

I am at leisure to make the only discovery that perhaps  
matters this side of death—

I am at leisure to discover myself.”

We cannot get away from ourselves : it is not the world which is too much with us but our own insistent, obtrusive personalities. By far the largest amount of poetry in these days is frankly lyrical, and the rest, which pretends to be epic like Mr. Doughty's *Mansoul* or Mr. Hardy's *Dynasts*, or narrative like Mr. Masefield's *Daffodil Fields*, is lyric disguised.

But on turning over the pages of a few books of modern

verse, one may be inclined to think that, far from poetry becoming more lyrical, it is becoming more dramatic. There is hardly a poet who does not attempt dramatic dialogues or monologues, sometimes whole plays, sometimes merely dramatic lyrics. Mr. Sturge Moore in *Tragic Mothers*, Mr. Bottomley, Mr. Abercrombie, Mr. Willoughby Weaving, Mr. Cousins and many others have tried this style. Yet this increase in dramatic literature does not contradict what was said above.

Our lyrists have become analysts and the transcendence of the confusion of emotional currents which the lyric demands is hardly possible for them. They have become acutely conscious of the conflict which makes life, and they are too introspective to see the higher unity. The conflict thus becomes for them a drama acted out by one phase of character against another. And yet the drama remains lyrical, if lyric means the expression of an emotion peculiar to the poet. Though they do not offer us a lyric in the narrow formal sense, it is obvious that the creative impulse, be it in monologue or drama or sonnet, has come from within not from without. The cerebral processes or the intellectual phases are personified and given names from a more or less familiar background, or the poet looks about him for a symbol in some actual dramatic conflict which sufficiently expresses his own. Sometimes the poet is so far successful as to achieve both a readable drama and a true record of his own mental history. Mr. Bottomley's *King Lear's Wife* is a good example. But no one has achieved such unity in this dramatising of the emotions as Mr. Hardy. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Mr. Hardy does not see the universe in terms of himself but himself in terms of the universe. His megalomania is not a petty obsession but a sublime self-centred system. "No

other English dramatist," said a writer in the *Times Literary Supplement* some time ago, " has written an historical play which more closely resembles than does *The Dynasts* a vast panoramic fiction, wherein real men and women so strangely reflect the idiosyncracies of a distinct personality and imagination. So with these poems. They are one and all haunted with the presence of their writer."

## XII.

It is in the form of modern poetry that most of its deficiencies occur. A complete examination of all the stylistic phenomena would be outside the limits of this discussion, but, since the changes in form are themselves a tendency of great moment, they cannot be altogether ignored.

We may divide the modern poets into those who keep the old technique and those who search for a new—the conservatives and the extremists, with many more or less commendable trimmers who are seeking some sort of *rapprochement*. The first party have also been loyal to the old background but they are the least instructive and the least alive. The chief fault of Dr. Bridges and Mr. L. Housman and Mr. Sturge Moore and Mr. Brett Young is their excessive technical sophistication. They have gone on in the old Victorian way, seeking ever fresh subtlety but at the same time coming nearer and nearer the precipice of affectation. In justice to Dr. Bridges, however, it must be said that he, by the very subtlety of his subtlety and by his keen self-criticism, is less likely to fall into the pitfalls spread for his fellows. They are striving to be loyal to their masters and at the same time to sing the old songs

with new variations. Dr. Bridges has not any fear of the hackneyed figure or the prosaic phrase ; he can extract an almost incredible beauty from what had seemed exhausted expressions and catch a new magic in the gradus epithet. This is no more than saying that the Poet Laureate is an infinitely greater artist than any of his party. But he is one with them in the extreme consciousness of his art ; their poetry lacks a certain inevitability which poetry should at least seem to have. It is a question of interest whether poetry does not fail in arousing in the reader the completest ecstasy of which it is capable by becoming too conscious, too obviously artistic. Does the bringing up of the creative joy of the artist from the unconscious to the conscious not detract both from the inspiration and from the effect on the audience ? Do not the art and the technique of the poem begin to attract an attention which it is their duty to excite for the poetry ?

It can hardly be denied that, in the work of the above-mentioned quartet and in that of others who at times have tried the older manner—Mr. W. J. Turner in *Paris and Helen*, Mr. Cousins, J. E. Flecker, Mr. Davison and many others, when too much liberty has palled,—there is too much conscious elaboration and insistence on detail because the poets are not single-minded enough. Mr. Nichols, for example, in *The Sprig of Lime* has so elaborated his truly poetic theme that he has lost his sense of proportion, and Mr. Hodgson's fine *Song of Honour* would have gained rather than lost by condensation. Mr. Evan Morgan in retelling the old tale of Eros and Psyche has so drowned his muse with words that she has not survived to finish the story. Even Mr. Aldington in some of his *Images*, and Mr. Huxley in *Leda* forget aims and poetry in abundance. It is a vice common to all the minors who-

try this style. When they should be spontaneous, they are heavy and awkward by reason of their ornaments, like Queen Elizabeth in gala dress ; or else they cover up tenuity of thought in a swirling cloud of verbiage. Thus Miss Martin addresses " an elemental spirit " :

" Sister of torrents, and the wild sea's daughter,  
    Come at my call, come swiftly, and come soon ;  
Borne by a thousand waves of wind and water,  
    Lit by a thousand candles of the moon.

" Blown by a thousand airs from forest alleys,  
    Sped by a thousand songs of bird and bee,  
Wafted on fragrance of a thousand valleys,  
    Where'er thou wanderest, O come to me ! "

Obscurity is not the blemish of any particular age, but in times like our own and the Alexandrian, after long ages of poetic productivity have used up the more obvious subjects and forced the poets, in search of the fresh and striking, to use a less natural language, it is specially noticeable. To-day our poets have tried, as we saw, to escape triteness by an ever-increasing elaboration of language. But the craving for novelty has frequently resulted, too, in an ever-deepening allusiveness and impressionism of diction, unnecessarily obscure and not worth the trouble of unravelling.

" Cowed hearts in This " [says Mr. Bottomley in *Babel*]  
    " conceived a pyramid,  
That leaned to hold itself upright, a thing  
Foredoomed to limits, death and an easy apex ;  
*Then postulants for the stars' previous wisdom*  
Standing on Carthage must get nearer still."

The following from Mr. Moore is less obscure but it illustrates well the distortion of language—an Alexandrian conceit for which the theme of the poem, “Sent from Egypt with a fair Robe of Tissue to a Sicilian Wine-dresser, 276 B.C.”, is no excuse :

“ And find the deepest bottom, most remote  
 From all encroachment of the crumbling shore,  
 Where no fresh stream tempers the rich salt wave,  
 Forcing rash sweetness on sage ocean’s brine.”

We came upon this recently ; it is by Mr. Clifford Bax :

“ Fixed thus beyond altimetry and shade—  
 In adamantine Tenement eterne  
 (Where fools are wise, and where the wise must learn)  
 So nidulate with beauties, and inlaid  
 Past tessarae from rich Carthage’s mine ;  
 Fetiferous of gems which sparkle more  
 Than fairy lights in eye of queen, or o’er  
 Her crowned brow, or mother-o’-pearl divine—  
 We reach at last (on no alula wing)  
 Our Pinnacle of home—a glorious thing ! ”

We suppose this is all right. When such passages occur in the less careful (which is practically synonymous with the more revolutionary) poets, we are probably right in thinking that the poet has taken the way of least resistance: not that he has had an idea which only a rhythm or a vague allusion or the association of ideas could suggest, but that, in the way deplorably common with modern poets, he has been content with his second best. In Mr. Sturge Moore or in the highly finished frescoes of Mr. Turner’s *Paris and Helen*, we must attribute the obscurity to literary sophistication, to Alexandrianism. Wilfred Owen’s darkness of

meaning, on the other hand, is due to the fact that his work was rather the rough draft of poetry than poetry itself : *Wild with all Regrets*, a revised version of *A Terre*, proves how the poet, had he lived, would have removed certain difficulties.

We may notice here, in passing, a curious phenomenon in modern art which, though it has significance for the content, more obviously affects the form. Aristotle in a profound sentence inferred that each artistic kind can give only that kind of pleasure and that amount of pleasure which is appropriate to it.\* Yet to-day artists of all kinds are attempting to satisfy two or more of our æsthetic needs at the same time, not by the marriage of the artistic kinds as in the Greek tragic drama, but by a process which can only be called blending. The sculptors, for example, of the school of Rodin, by various devices unknown to the classical and Renaissance artists, are approximating more and more to the greater suggestiveness of painting ; they are trying to supply the nuances of colour by the subtle manipulation of light and shade and of light shining through marble, as in Rodin's *La Pensée* at the Luxembourg, by making the actual quality of the material employed contribute some significance, by the choice of subjects which the media of sculpture were once thought too fragile to represent, by grouping and by the preference for two or three detached figures, by allegorical themes and generally by relying more than has ever been done on the spectator's sympathy and imagination. In music, the composer is ever more and more attempting to draw pictures, and by sudden shrill chords to suggest lightning and by rustling tremolando wind in the trees. Painters, too, seem to be seeking some new amalgam but the vagaries of the Cubists

\* Poetics, xiv.

and the other groups forbid us to say what the aspiration is. And in poetry itself the same confusion of aims is apparent. Mr. Vachel Lindsay is not sure whether what he is writing is poetry or oratory. Mr. W. J. Turner and Mr. Sturge Moore in their recent work are drawing near to pictorial art. There is a considerable body of verse, also, which has no very deep meaning and is written almost solely for its music ; much of Mr. de la Mare's work is pure melody, the symbolism of which is more or less facultative. There are other excellent examples of this Poesque word-music in Mr. Turner's *Romance* and Mr. Stephen's *The Fifteen Acres* and more obviously in the pleasant jingle of Mr. Belloc's *Tarantella*. These new blends are not in themselves uninteresting, but we have mentioned them rather as examples of the innumerable experiments characteristic of this age.

The Victorians had not been slow in trying new devices. But none of them set a precedent of experiment which our age has adopted. It is again Walt Whitman who, directly and indirectly, has had more influence than any other writer on the form of modern poetry, an influence as unfortunate as that which he has exercised over its content. He has been adopted by the extremists in the revolt as their master, and by his negligent enthusiasm has been the inspirer of nearly every experiment in form and the unacknowledged encourager of every carelessness in style. He was the father of *vers libre* ; he was the most insistent of the Philistines ; he was the high priest of realism and of the worship of power and energy, the vast and the primitive. Probably Whitman's genius was too torrential to submit to the forms which generations had willingly accepted, though there is truth also in the statement that he was at his best when, consciously or unconsciously, he approxi-

mated to more regular and intelligible rhythms than when he strung together broken syntax and scientific catalogues. Whitman, with a blindness accountable only by the tyranny of his theory, denied strenuously the value of accepted forms, the support they give and the discipline they impose. These forms are like pistons which compress steam to power or like pipes which give water the force of a sledge-hammer. Whitman himself was like a mountain torrent that needed not mechanical constraints to dig a channel deep in the rocks ; to refuse him the strength of the cataract would be absurd. But his great and powerful prose-poetry has been taken as a precedent by decadent, thin-voiced, utterly sophisticated young men, pigmy characters by the side of the robust, single-minded American. Having neither literary form to restrain nor conviction to accelerate, they sprawl like a sluggish stream in the sand. Mr. F. S. Flint, in the Poetry Bookshop *Chapbook* for March, 1920, says that, though there may once have been some artistic necessity for metrical schemes, "there is none now." "Every schoolboy can acquire the tricks." We doubt the existence of this schoolboy quite as much as Macaulay's, and we maintain that Whitman, by removing these salutary limitations, is responsible for the vast production of *vers libres* by those whom the exigencies of stanza and rhyme would have kept silent, to the great advantage of literature. We are, perhaps, apt to regard the free verse movement as entirely a reaction against Victorian finish. There is no doubt much truth in this view and, at the same time, in the work of many *vers librists*, there is an honest endeavour to free poetry from what they consider a strangling convention. There has been a gain in freedom, but this universal enfranchisement has set free all the brigands of the world of

letters. Much is mere wordy rubbish, the suppression of which would have set up no dangerous complexes in the minds of authors. And even when what is said is of a certain interest, we are left wondering why it was not said in prose. This naturally raises the old question whether there is any fundamental reason why the unique experience which we call poetry could not be expressed in prose as well as in verse. We do not mean to argue the matter here ; but we think that, if for no other reason than to discourage poetasters, we should refuse the name of poetry to anything not in verse which it has been " the practice of the best poets, of all countries and in all ages " to observe.

It is impossible to enumerate all the varieties of prose-poets or writers of " non-metrical " poetry. Though Mr. Sturge Moore's *Blind Thamyris*, a prose poem with a few inset lyrics, is probably affected by the example of Whitman, yet the composition is definitely prose of the same kind—precious or rhetorical—which was being written in France until his death by Charles Péguy and now by Gybal and Claudel, and which is the modern representative of Sir Thomas Browne, Landor and Chateaubriand. The most novel of the experimenters who have followed and varied on the practice of Whitman is Mr. Flint himself, whose *Cadences*, as he calls his musical units, are an attempt to give to every phrase or breath-group exactly the rhythm which he judges proper for the thought :

" Tired faces,  
eyes that have never seen the world,  
bodies that have never lived in air,  
lips that have never minted speech,  
they are clipped and garbled blocking the highway."

Here it will be seen that the poem is not a variation on a

theme but rather a series of impromptu bars or chords ; the expression does not in any way conform to a pattern, for it is the rhythm which shapes itself continuously to the sense. It seems to us that this highly artificial manner of composition is a negation of the principle of liberty which Whitman exemplified, since it imposes restraints much more difficult to conform to and less satisfying in the result. Miss Mary Richardson has also made an attempt to improve on Whitman. For the most part she retains rhythm but she rejects metre for "tone" and "syllable-craft." The possibility of combining all four does not seem to have occurred to her. We have mentioned her work rather to illustrate the different variations on Whitman's scheme than for its intrinsic value.

The work of Miss Amy Lowell brings us to the *vers librists* proper. She calls it "polyphonic prose" but there is nothing in its actual form to distinguish it from the others. Some like Mr. John Austin add rhyme occasionally. Mr. Vachel Lindsay is only half a Whitmanist and shows rather his comradeship and lofty complacency than his form. Mr. Huxley and Mr. Eliot and Mr. Pound, on the other hand, are cynical spectators of life; they have adopted free verse because the other is such a bore and implies that the poet who takes the trouble to write it is much more green and interested in life than they wish to be thought. Mr. Masters is a less bored cynic ; but his verse none the less lacks the rhythm and swing of Whitman's which at its best achieved something of the effect of a Greek ode. Mr. Carl Sandburg has some of the same taint as Mr. Eliot ; yet he is nearer to Whitman in strength and in his ready acceptance of all words and phrases, scientific, slang, technical, but lacks the fiery enthusiasm which made even these dead bones live. Not

one of them all has any real likeness to Whitman and none has Whitman's large control of rhythm. He was indeed a "mighty-mouthed inventor of harmonies" whose breath failed not through twenty or thirty words. Rarely do his followers dare to make a rhythmical unit of more than ten words. Yet we feel that unmetrical and ungrouped lines of the length of the metrical and co-related verses of *The Strayed Reveller* are false to Whitman's practice.

It is doubtful whether any melody of value which Whitman achieved only by violence could not have been produced by variations on the old instruments. Swinburne, who was profoundly influenced by him, but at the same time, too literary to scorn the prosodic forms made sacred by the great, revealed the unsuspected wealth and the infinite variations possible with the ordinary recurrent measures. Since Swinburne struck the new vein, there have been many other prospectors. The present Poet Laureate, outside his amusing but hardly convincing quantitative experiments, has been a most prosperous adventurer and come back with many delicate and haunting tunes. By other modifications of the established prosody, Mr. Kipling, directly and, through Swinburne, indirectly a disciple of Whitman, has found a brass-band kind of music and at times a full-toned but less blatant power. A later poet, one of the most melodious and cunning of them all, Mr. de la Mare, has demanded and received from his instrument flute-like, elfin notes, as elusive as a dream.

It is possible that had not Whitman written our poets might have discovered the trick of Tennyson and every songster have his tune by heart. It is possible, but hardly probable. Then came Whitman with a new and less exacting technique, for he achieved his results by abundance and large effects, not by subtleties of intonation.

We think, however, that to him must very largely be credited the modern rage for experiment, even if few of the real poets have definitely taken him as their model. If he is to have commendation for the happy experiments, he must also bear the blame for the unsuccessful attempts of others, perhaps no less gifted, to increase the possibilities of verse. Mr. Bottomley's blank verse has much of the muscular pulse of Whitman's poetry, but he fails to convince us that its ruggedness has an organic connection with the sense ; and Mr. Abercrombie, more conscientious as he is, has paid too dear a price for his experiments. Other rhymeless verse, such as Mr. Stephens uses in stanzaic form, is clever but hardly satisfying ; and Mr. Joyce's quatrains in which the first and third lines rhyme and the second and fourth have assonantal endings, are very ugly to no purpose :

“ I hear an army charging upon the land,  
And the thunder of horses plunging foam about  
their knees :  
Arrogant, in black armour, behind them stand,  
Disdaining the reins, with fluttering whips, the  
charioteers.”

This is a cruel deception after raising false hopes. More daring and sincere was Wilfred Owen's substitution of consonantal, not vocalic, assonance for rhyme. The poet has succeeded in shaking us from our spiritual inertia ; but we feel that the extraordinary effect of his work is the secret rather of his personality than of his technique.

Even such a brief survey of the form and style of our modern poets as we have made is very discouraging. It is not that there is any lack of promise ; there probably never was a time when so many poetical minds were at

work together ; there are literally hundreds who from time to time can provide us with the authentic gold of poetry ; there are many sincere and honest artists. But they are seldom at their best ; the inspiration comes in a happy moment which is eternised in a vivid image or epithet or stanza, and then, instead of keeping silence when the mood has gone, they plod on in lifeless verbiage. Poetry to-day for the most part lacks the ordonnance which makes each lyric of Arnold, each sonnet of Heredia perfect. It is true that in the poetry of Mr. de la Mare and Mr. Davison and Mr. Davies, to name a few of the most deserving of praise, this architectonic completeness is a thing to wonder at and admire. But apart from a comparatively small number whose work is of fairly uniform excellence, our poetry to-day is in scraps. It is, perhaps, because of this uncertainty of inspiration that so few risk anything but lyrics and that so many of these lyrics are like epigrams from the Greek anthology.

The example of Whitman, however, has had a more subtle influence on modern poetry than this. The most serious charge against him is that he has blunted the artistic conscience of our poets and, by the opportunity he has provided for versifiers, has lowered the standard of excellence demanded from them. There is hardly a poet who is not too soon content ; and to make their task the easier they are dropping rhymes or using stanzas which require only half the lines to answer, or ballad verse which permits as many rhymes as the poet can muster but will be content, if need be, with two, or irregular verse for the blemishes in which the very irregularity is an excellent excuse. If the poets are afraid of the old rhymes, as some critics say, they are not afraid of imperfect ones : Mr. D. H. Lawrence in *Service for all the Dead*, the whole effect

of which depends on a repetition of the first verse at the end, can suffer these rhymes to pass :

“ Between the avenues of cypresses,  
All in their scarlet cloaks, and surplices  
Of linen, go the chanting choristers,  
The priests in gold and black, the villagers.

“ And all along the path to the cemetery  
The round, dark heads of men crowd silently,  
And black-scarved faces of women-folk, wistfully  
Watch at the banner of death, and the mystery.”<sup>2</sup>

In Mr. Squire’s *A Far Place*, a richly coloured piece, the ear feels itself defrauded by faulty rhymes and the absence of rhymes where they are expected :

“ The lilacs browned, a breath dried the laburnum,  
The swollen peonies scattered the earth with blood,  
And the rhododendrons shed their sumptuous mantles,  
And the marshalled irises unsceptred stood.”

Nor are the poets, even the most careful craftsman, free from still less pardonable mistakes. If we find solecisms in grammar in Mr. Sturge Moore—and it is not impossible—it is not astonishing to find them in the minors. It is Mr. Moore, too, who in *The Gazelles* has given us the following incongruities :

“ Then the warm wet clutch on the nape of the neck,  
Through which the keen incisors drive ;  
Then the fleet knees give, down drops the wreck  
Of yesterday’s pet that was so alive ; ”

and the Persian ladies are described as being

“ So choicefully prepared to please.”

Mr. Brett Young tells us that *The Leaning Elm* was

“ So dead that when the breath of winter cast  
Wild snow upon the blast,  
The other living branches, downward bowed,  
Shook free their crystal shroud  
And shed upon your blackened trunk beneath  
Their livery of death ; ”

but in spite of all this elaborate explanation, we fail to see that the degree of deadness in the tree had anything to do with the falling of the “ crystal shroud ” on it. Some of Mr. Bottomley’s wrenches of language and his unmusical blank verse we have noticed elsewhere. His handling of verse is largely a deliberate experiment to enlarge its compass ; but what can we say of this quotation from Mr. Brooks’ *Camelot* which is not experimental?—

“ Snow, come and gone, wets the wide street slate-grey,  
Hedged with low buildings and dark-closed shops,  
Whose tops white sleet and black roof chisel out  
In formal shapes.”

Mr. Moore’s verse, too, especially his blank verse which professes to be in the Victorian tradition, is often as harsh as that of the most daring adventurers without their excuse. In many others the same unintentional and unexplained imperfections block the flow of the poem ; or when they achieve a real rhythm it is not vital to the theme but an independent, frequently mechanical measure, running a more or less parallel course.

Such is the measure of the Whitmaniacs’ offence. Whitman himself may be the source of their doctrines, but they have perverted and caricatured them. In the place of art they have set up a facile mediocrity and in the name

of liberty they have proclaimed anarchy. We might have forgiven them if they had segregated themselves ; but for having infected, in some degree, nearly all our poetry, we cannot forgive them.

### XIII.

These are some of the tendencies which the present writer sees in modern poetry. Some are obvious and have already been noted : some are common to nearly all the modern poets, others are apparent in only a few. None are, perhaps, so strong as the movements in the Romantic Revival. For there is a greater confusion of aims to-day, but we feel that this very multiplicity is itself a tendency, one of the most marked of all.

We are led to ask ourselves, in conclusion, two questions, Are these tendencies healthy ? and whither do they lead ?

We shall attempt an answer first to the second. It is always dangerous to prophesy about literature. The sequence of cause and effect, of tendency and goal has not always been as the critic has foretold. For optimism with regard to literature has not often been so robust as in the Alexandria of Lycophron or the Rome of Quintilian, and pessimism never so profound as among the earlier Elizabethan critics. And it is in these two periods, the Alexandrian and the early Elizabethan, that we see the nearest parallels to to-day.

Like the earlier Elizabethans, best represented for the moment by Sidney and Harvey, the moderns feel more consciously, and with greater intensity, the inadequacy of the older schools for modern needs. It is true that the age before Spenser was barren and depressing and, while

there seemed no prospect then of ever reaching the meadows and gardens, our poets appear rather to be leading us away from the Happy Valley and the rich lands of Victorianism to the wilderness. That is a matter of little importance for the time being. What does concern us is that both Elizabethans and Georgians have felt that the old methods, good or bad, will not satisfy them. They both have been conscious of a message which the existing idiom could not express. There is, therefore, in both periods a searching for new means and a wider range of expression and a modification of the old. Like the Elizabethans, we too have our word-makers who are seeking to enlarge the capacities and subtleties of the tongue, our Lyls and Sidneys and Petrarchans. And we, too, can say of Mr. Doughty and Mr. Hardy and Mr. Aldous Huxley, as Jonson declared of Spenser and with something of the same pedantic justice, that they write no language. We can see to-day the same readiness to adopt new subjects, for our poets are enlarging the choice of subjects and are admitting the realistic, the horrible and the ugly to full poetical citizenship. Just as the old chivalry was charged with a new meaning by Spenser, so our old conventions when they are used at all, are used as vehicles for poetry which has its inspiration in new theories of morals and art. Moreover some of our poets have found the old versification an impossible bondage, a bondage which, they say, inhibits more through limitation than it contributes by regularity or the support of its definite form. Is it fanciful to see in the classical "versifying" of Harvey and Drant—a movement, it is true, rather towards greater strictness than to emancipation—something of an Elizabethan parallel to the experiments of our *vers librists* and other young revolutionaries?

The transitional character of both these periods, Eliza-

bethan and Georgian, is as obvious as the experimental. We have in both the same pause in certain of the arts and the same feverish search and boldness of invention in others. And in literature with which we are mainly concerned, we can see to-day how our men of letters are waiting for a lead just as the Elizabethans waited for their Spenser. We feel to-day that anything may happen in the world of letters, that a genius may appear at any day with a play or a poem or a novel or anything else. The very uncertainty of the trend of our literature forbids us to prophesy : we dare not say "Lo ! here" or "Lo ! there" but we can declare that no Spenser has yet arisen.

Nevertheless in spite of these signs of a possible spring, there is apparent in our poetry, on the other hand, not a little of the over-ripeness of autumn. The Elizabethan age had only the frost of the English Chaucerians, the January of Skelton and the doubtful March of Wyatt and Surrey between it and Chaucer. The poets, therefore, began afresh with no outworn phrases, empty pretences and discredited talismans. But we, despite our reaction from Victorianism, cannot deny that to the end, like an Indian summer, it continued to bud and flower and produce fruit : Tennyson's *Ballads and other Poems* and *Demeter* are like an after-blossom and an after-fruitage on trees which seemed to have borne to the full. We are, therefore, differentiated from the Victorians by no productivity of our own as compared with their sterility, by no breach of continuity, but by reaction and rebellion. And this revolt is in many ways more apparent than real : much of our modern poetry is a development from what has gone before, however much the younger poets have noisily blasphemed the Victorian ideal. It is true that the poetic age which began with the Romantics in the late eighteenth

century came to an end with Swinburne. But our age succeeded it as son succeeds father, whereas the advent of Blake and Wordsworth was like the usurpation of a new dynasty.

This explains why there are so many Alexandrian features in the poetry of to-day. We are gleaning the same fields as the Victorians, we are combing the same beaches. They have seized the ripest heads and the gayest flowers : they have gathered the most beautiful shells and seaweeds. Our poets must be content with the corn they have left because it was bruised or barely ripe or out of the way, and with the pebbles that have more quaintness and deformity than beauty. The simple and the obvious and the natural are now almost impossible. Our poets, if they would be original and striking, must go further afield. There is nothing decadent in a desire for freshness until it becomes, as with the Alexandrians, a diseased craving. And has not this longing for some new thing, merely because it is new, infected modern life ? We are plagued by new creeds, new philosophies, new moralities ; and in all the arts, poetry included, we are misled by new artistic aims, definite only in revolt and vague in everything which makes an aim effective. It is too easy to be rebellious in art : one merely needs to make a volteface and both manner and matter are there for the rebel, the old signboards of his predecessors reversed. The science of the Victorians reversed is our realism : Browning turns tail and we have Siegfried Sassoon, Tennyson is metamorphosed (oh ! strange monster) into Mr. Huxley and Mr. Eliot is the tergiversation of the Parnassian Arnold. The age returns to its own vomit.

We desire the new, not so much because we have exhausted the old, but because the vice of our age as of the Alexandrian is dilettantism with which inevitably goes eclecti-

cism. For the mighty torrent which gave inspiration to the earliest Romantics, to the Spasmodics, the Pre-Raphaelites, the *Æsthetes* is now being lost in the sand. And men and women play with poetry and dabble in *vers libre* and economically spin out the now feeble current into sluggish gutters to irrigate the Alexandrian garden of some coterie. As in ancient Alexandria literature has become a polite industry or an agreeable pastime, in which efficiency and tolerable fame are to be achieved by obeying and inventing ephemeral theories: and as a natural result a large percentage of our modern poetry exhibits in different guises the literary mannerisms and affectations of decadent Hellenism.

Like the Alexandrians we are out on a double quest. In turning from the richness and artistry of the Victorians, certain of our poets have found something new in a highly artificial simplicity. Much of the new pastoralism, no doubt, is delightful and more intimate with nature than the idyllia of Theocritus. Yet the too conscious elaboration of simplicity and simplesse, whether in fields or railway stations and bars, is in itself Alexandrian. And, on the other hand, we too have our Lycophrons who think they have achieved poetry by unintelligibility.

Moreover we have the critical intensity of the Alexandrians. We are critical, not only of others to an almost unparalleled degree, but also of ourselves: for we have so carried introspection into every mental activity that the single-mindedness which is behind the typical Elizabethan lyric is impossible for us: the pure white light is refracted in our many-faceted minds. Though it is recognised that poetry must be passionate, our poets, too conscious of themselves to be completely sincere and self-revealing, affect a passion which is mere rhetoric or take refuge in an equally theatrical pessimism and cynicism. How different

from the passionate reserve of Dante, so ardent, so perfectly controlled !

Thus we have the mental outlook of Alexandrians. Our minds are replete, and we look at life through the sickliness of sophistication. The age has tasted all things and turned away with weariness and disgust.

#### XIV.

This is a lame and impotent conclusion, and we would fain hark back to the Elizabethan parallel rather than end on this despondent note. For we believe we are justified in taking, on the whole, a hopeful view of the condition of English poetry to-day. It would be easy for us in early March to see nothing but the sad relics of the year that is past : but though we have looked in vain for many a day at the vacancy of the torpid earth and the ruins of our last summer for a sign of returning vigour, to-day at last there is a feeling of spring in the air, the sap is beginning to flow again in the stiffened grass, the hedges are bourgeoning anew and the bare fields have an unmistakable flush of green. There is much in contemporary literature that is experimental and grotesque and theatrical and crude : these are the natural growing pains of our rejuvenescent poetry. There is much that is insincere and cynical and affected and dilettante : these are the dotages of Victorianism. What we have to be thankful for above all is the abundant sincerity of our poets. They may not be great artists and not many of them very great poets, but the majority are in deep earnest. Though they are theorists and experimenters, they are interested not merely in form but in the manifold facts of life, a full-blooded existence.

It is, then, by reason of their sincerity and veracity that the vitality of our modern literature seems greater than its decadence, that it is more closely akin to the Elizabethan than to the Alexandrian age : and there is no reason why we should be more fearful than our predecessors were in the intervals of eclipse which are as periodic and almost as calculable in literature as in the solar system. The years of the Commonwealth, the decade following the death of Dryden, the five or six after that of Byron were times of apparent falling-off in the quality and the quantity of poetry. [So it is to-day ; we have passed through some years in which the genius of the land has lain fallow in preparation for a new harvest. But whatever the hesitation and whatever the timidity, we have more than sufficient proof in a score of poets that the delay is not due at least to exhaustion but, as we said at the beginning, to an entire reversal of our attitude, aims and theories from the Victorian settlement. Perhaps already we can see dimly the goal to which the modern period is making ; if the Romantic Revival was the realisation of the ideal, this, the Realistic Revolt, is to be the idealization of the real.

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24

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